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The Black Death and its effect on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century art

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THE BLACK DEATH AND ITS EFFECT ON FOURTEENTH- AND FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ART

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The School of Art

by
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B.A., Louisiana State University, 2004
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*To my parents, Johnny and Annette DesOrmeaux,
who stressed the importance of a formal education
and supported me in every way.
You are my most influential teachers.*

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Table of Contents

DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTER	
1 THE PLAGUE.....	1
2 EFFECTS OF THE PLAGUE.....	8
3 ART AFTER THE PLAGUE.....	29
Buboes.....	31
Death.....	35
<i>Transis</i>	48
Jews.....	53
Flagellants.....	56
Tabernacle.....	61
The Dance of Death.....	62
Saints.....	76
<i>Madonna della Misericordia</i>	91
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	96
VITA.....	99

Abstract

In early October of 1347, ships from Caffa docked at the port of Messina in Sicily. The traders brought with them a fierce plague that swept through Europe from 1348 to 1352. This pandemic, which killed approximately half of Europe's population, came to be known as the Black Death. The fear propagated by the spread of the plague and its cyclical recurrence greatly affected the art created in Europe over the next 150 years.

Accounts of victims of the plague and other contemporary documents, such as medical treatises, give modern readers a glimpse into the psyche of medieval people. These insights aid in understanding the symbols and subject matter of art that was created in the wake of outbreaks of the plague. Images of the physical manifestations of disease and images of death, such as the jolly skeletons in scenes of the dance of death, preserve medieval peoples' preoccupation with and fear of death. Psychosocial responses are recorded in images of hysterical actions, such as the burning of Jewish people. The succor that was sought through adoration of religious images, such as saints and the Madonna, confirms that medieval people retained hope despite their fear. Both the resilient nature of humans and the fear initiated by widespread, sudden, gruesome death have been preserved in these images. Through this art, we discover that medieval people were not entirely unlike ourselves.

Chapter One

The Plague

A fierce plague swept through Europe in 1348, indiscriminately killing most people who came into contact with it, irrespective of age or social status. This pandemic, which remains perhaps the single greatest human tragedy in history, is known as the Black Death.¹ The effects of this catastrophe pervaded every aspect of medieval life, from the availability of food to familial bonds. The Black Death also affected art. Countless books have been written that address such topics as the social and medical aspects of the plague, but few scholarly writings analyze how the Black Death's effect on the human psyche was manifested in art and how this art in turn affected the human psyche. In this thesis, I will explore the extent to which the fear propagated by the spread of the plague affected the creation of art, the subject matter of this art, and the symbols found within the compositions.

As indicated by the catastrophe of 1348,² the plague that struck Europe is the most virulent of infectious diseases, causing pandemics rather than isolated outbreaks.³ The disease occurs in cycles, reappearing between two and twenty years after a pandemic

¹ Contemporary accounts call the disease "pestilence" or "plague." Plague comes from the Latin word *plaga*, which can be translated as "a blow." Not until the sixteenth century was the pandemic called the "Black Death," according to John Aberth, *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350, A Brief History with Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 1. This title probably stems from a misunderstanding of the Latin term *atra mors*. *Atra* can mean terrible or black, but probably means terrible in this situation as opposed to black, which came into use as a description of the common symptoms of bubonic plague - buboes and hemorrhaging - which cause blackish formations under the skin of the infected, according to Ole J. Benedictow, *The Black Death 1346-1353: The Complete History* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004), 3.

² The date of 1348 is used because this was the year of the greatest impact. The plague entered Europe in 1347 and spread throughout the continent until 1352.

³ Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 9.

(on average every six years), with each outbreak lasting approximately twelve months.⁴

The effects of the return of plague in outbreaks subsequent to that of 1348 will also be addressed in this thesis. Recorded outbreaks include, but are not limited to, epidemics of 1362, 1368, 1374, 1381, 1390, 1399, 1405, 1410, 1423, and 1429.⁵ Though these subsequent outbreaks were not as widespread, I will assert that the psychological effects of the great tragedy of 1348 compounded the effects of recurring plagues and that this is salient in art.⁶

The disease that devastated Europe was caused by three different types of plague: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicaemic.⁷ All three are bacterial infections caused by *Yersinia pestis*.⁸ Transmitted by fleas, bubonic is the most common and least lethal; mortality rates of this type are 50% to 60%. After being bitten by an infected flea, there is an incubation period of about six days. Then, a black pustule surrounded by an inflamed red ring forms at the site of the bite.⁹ Flu-like symptoms develop and blood pressure drops, pulse rate increases, and a sudden fever erupts, accompanied by chills, weakness, and headache. Soon after, the lymph node nearest the bite begins to swell with

⁴ Louise Marshall, “‘Waiting on the Will of the Lord’: The Imagery of the Plague” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1989), 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*; Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 126; Gottfried, 131-132.

⁶ Christine M. Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence: Iconography and Iconology* (Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2000), 10.

⁷ Gottfried, 8; Boeckl, *Images*, 9. Some scholars question the role of *Y. pestis* in the Black Death because of its rapid spread. In this thesis, I will agree with Boeckl and others that *Y. pestis* is responsible for the Black Death. This conclusion is supported by recorded symptoms experienced during the fourteenth century and most importantly by the recent discovery of *Y. pestis* DNA in the dental pulp of bodies found in mass graves in France. Also, no credible alternative has been suggested. Inconsistencies that lead to questioning of the cause can be explained by findings that *Y. pestis* regularly mutates into “hyper virulent” strains in nature, suggests Aberth, 25.

⁸ Boeckl, *Images*, 7-8. *Yersinia pestis* was the name given to the pathogen in 1970. The original name, *Pasteurella pestis*, was assigned when Dr. Alexandre Yersin discovered it in 1897.

⁹ Gottfried, 8.

infection. The most common lymph nodes affected are those in the groin (inguinal bubo), neck (cervical bubo), thigh (femoral bubo), or armpits (axillary bubo) (figs. 1-3).¹⁰



1. Femoral bubo.



2. Cervical bubo.



3. Axillary bubo.

They fill with pus and increase to the size of an egg, or even an orange. These “buboes” lend the name bubonic to this type of plague. Other physical symptoms include diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, dehydration, and abdominal pain.¹¹ Sometimes, subcutaneous hemorrhaging occurs and causes purple blotches to appear on the skin.¹² Although bubonic plague is not always lethal, the appearance of these dark blotches meant the

¹⁰ Boeckl, *Images*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Gottfried, 8.

victim would certainly die from the infection.¹³ Cell necrosis caused by internal hemorrhaging intoxicates the nervous system and leads to a variety of bizarre behaviors in the infected individual.¹⁴ Victims' behavior oscillates between listlessness and raving before settling on delirium. Contemporary observers recorded contorted facial expressions, slurred speech, uneven strides, and awkward body movements. The final cause of death is cardiac arrest, frequently preceded by a coma.¹⁵

Pneumonic plague does not involve fleas, but is transmitted from person to person. The infection caused by bubonic plague moves into the lungs. The incubation period for pneumonic plague is only two to three days, after which the body drastically cools, the skin becomes bluish due to lack of oxygen, and the individual begins to cough severely. Bloody sputum is released with each cough, and once airborne the *Y. pestis* that is contained within is easily transmitted from person to person. Like bubonic plague, the victim suffers from neurological malfunctions and physical ailments. Pneumonic plague is rarer than bubonic, but much more severe because of the rapid spread and a higher mortality rate – one which approaches 100%.

Septicaemic plague also has a mortality rate of 100%, though it is considerably less common than bubonic plague. Transmitted through fleas or body lice, septicaemic plague has no incubation period. After infection a rash forms, and the victim, who awoke in good health, dies within a day. Comparatively little is known about the role of this form of plague in the Black Death.¹⁶

¹³ Benedictow, 26.

¹⁴ Gottfried, 8.

¹⁵ Boeckl, *Images*, 11.

¹⁶ Gottfried, 8.

Knowledge of the symptoms of plague and the physical experience of medieval people before death aids in understanding the psychological impact of the Black Death, and therefore its effect on art. Not only was humanity confronted with widespread death, but with a sudden, gruesome, and painful demise against which people were nearly powerless. One must also understand the symptoms because, as I will later show, people depicted in art were sometimes portrayed with these physical manifestations of plague.

The causes of the Black Death – the flea, the rat, and the bacillus *Yersinia pestis* – have been labeled the “unholy trinity.”¹⁷ The flea thrives in environmental conditions of about 74° Fahrenheit and 60% humidity.¹⁸ In the years prior to the Black Death, Europe was experiencing these weather conditions.¹⁹ The rat flea, *Xenopsylla cheopis*, and the human flea, *Pulex irritans*, are both capable of transmitting plague.²⁰ Sometimes, an infected flea cannot ingest blood because *Y. pestis* obstructs its digestive tract. The blockage causes a flea to regurgitate into a bitten host rather than ingest the host’s blood, thereby infecting the host with plague. Unable to eat, the famished flea will bite with more frequency, accelerating the spread of plague.²¹ A flea can be carrying *Y. pestis* without its blocking the flea’s digestive tract, in which case the flea does not transmit plague when it bites a host. Also, *Y. pestis* can only enter a victim through a bite, as the bacilli cannot pass through intact skin.²²

¹⁷ Boeckl, *Images*, 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-10. Coincidentally, many saints who were prayed to for protection from the plague are celebrated on feast days that occur during summer months, when these optimal conditions occur.

¹⁹ Scott Tenner and Andrew Schamess, “Pandemic, medicine, and public health: *Yersinia pestis* and fourteenth-century European culture,” *The Pharos of Alpha Omega Alpha – Honor Medical Society*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Fall, 1993), 6.

²⁰ Boeckl, *Images*, 11. The human flea is not as susceptible to digestive blockage when infected with *Y. pestis*, so it is only a subsidiary factor to the rat flea in the spread of plague. The rat flea develops blockage easily, according to Benedictow, 16-17.

²¹ Boeckl, *Images*, 11.

²² Gottfried, 7-8.

The flea's preferred host is the Asian rodent *Rattus rattus*, a black rat that was introduced to Europe in the medieval period. Its low body temperature makes it an ideal host for the plague-bearing flea.²³ Many other rodents, such as squirrels and mice, carry the plague, but the black rat's close proximity to humans accelerates the spread of plague.²⁴ Living conditions in the fourteenth century were filthy by modern standards, both in homes and on ships. Bathing was infrequent, and even discouraged as defense against the plague.²⁵ People lived close to refuse and body waste in thatched-roof, dirt-floor homes, which were ideal habitats for the black rat. Even in urban homes, the black rat thrived in high roof beams and dark, dirty corners.²⁶ Grain, the black rat's preferred food, comprised almost all of medieval people's diet and could be found in most homes. The presence of grain not only nourished rats, but also the fleas on their backs, which had evolved with them to prefer grain if blood was not available.²⁷ Rats were not the only carriers of plague; household and barnyard animals also lived close to humans and shared the plague with them.²⁸ Because medieval people were ignorant as to the cause of the plague, images of rats are not found within plague art.

A particular dynamic exists between the "unholy trinity" that causes outbreaks of plague and its cyclical recurrence in humans. When *Y. pestis* is endemic to rodent populations, rats become a reservoir in which the disease can survive between outbreaks in human populations. Within these rat reservoirs, the disease is called silvatic plague.

The flea is hardy and can survive for six months to a year without a host.²⁹ Even if every

²³ Tenner and Schames, 7.

²⁴ Gottfried, 7.

²⁵ Aberth, 54.

²⁶ Gottfried, 7.

²⁷ Benedictow, 13 and 20. The flea could survive off of grain, but requires blood to lay eggs.

²⁸ Gottfried, 7. Horses and dogs are two animals that seem to be immune to the plague.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

member of a particular rat population succumbs to the plague, the flea can survive in its dark, wet burrows. Additionally, the rat flea is a fur flea as opposed to a nest flea, meaning that it is adapted to travel on rats or other furs and cloth.³⁰ This means that the textiles and furs that were moving along newly created trade routes in the fourteenth century could provide safe harbor for plague-carrying fleas, the effects of which will be discussed shortly.

Only in certain conditions will an infected flea begin to bite humans, not just when they live in close proximity. After rats, fleas do not prefer human hosts. They prefer secondary hosts, such as cats, to humans, and will only begin to bite humans when these populations die or are no longer available and a tertiary host is necessary. Moving to humans is not common, as many of the fleas' secondary hosts can tolerate small amounts of *Y. pestis* in their blood streams and live as a continuing host. Only when the bacilli multiply in the nervous or pulmonary system does the disease kill a secondary host, causing the flea to resort to human blood as subsistence.³¹ Thus, for the "unholy trinity" to affect humans, the rat must live and die near humans and other animals, the flea must be forced to seek hosts other than rats, and *Y. pestis* must kill the secondary hosts for the flea to finally move to humans. Modern understandings of how the plague spread allow for a better understanding of medieval people's beliefs about the cause of the plague. Knowing the complex nature of the plague and that it was propagated by creatures barely visible to the human eye helps us to understand medieval people's ignorance. This ignorance bred helplessness, which affected religious imagery in post-plague art.

³⁰ Benedictow, 19.

³¹ Gottfried, 7.

Chapter Two

Effects of the Plague

The fourteenth century has been dubbed “calamitous” by Barbara Tuchman. Along with the presence of *Y. pestis*, many factors acted in perfect conjunction to create the perfect tragedy that was the Black Death. Before the Black Death, Europe had been devastated by war, famine, earthquakes, and other horrors. For example, the same unusual weather in Europe that allowed the flea to thrive also harmed crops, causing famine. A shortage of fruits and vegetables left Europeans with compromised immune systems to face the “unholy trinity.”³² Another of these horrors – war – is believed to have been the principal avenue along which the plague first made its way to Europe.

Y. pestis is native to some parts of the world known as “inveterate foci.”³³ Along with Siberia, east Africa, and others, central Asia is one of these regions.³⁴ During the mid-fourteenth century, plague had begun in central Asia and was sweeping through India, Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, and Asia Minor. But before the plague itself struck Europe, rumors of “whole territories covered by dead bodies” had circulated, and a plague of fear was born in Europe.³⁵ This fear would soon be justified.

In the fourteenth century, the Genoese had settlements at Caffa, on the Black Sea.³⁶ Here, conflicts between Christians and Muslims compelled the latter to seek aid from the Mongols. A large Asian army arrived and laid siege to Caffa until plague diminished the Mongols’ numbers and forced them to call off the siege. But before they

³² Tenner and Schamess, 6.

³³ Gottfried, 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵ Tuchman, 97.

³⁶ Caffa is now known as Feodosilla, Crimea, Ukraine.

left, the surviving Mongols catapulted their dead over Caffa's city walls and into the citadel, introducing plague to its inhabitants.³⁷ Afterwards, twelve Genoese ships left Caffa along major east-west trading routes that had developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In early October 1347, the trading ships docked at the port of Messina in Sicily. Although they were not allowed to stay because of the illness of those on board, plague had already been introduced to Europe by the time they left.³⁸ As stated earlier, the flea was well-suited to travel with the cargo of ships. A Franciscan friar from Piazza, Michael Platiensis, observed that the Genoese ships brought "with them such a sickness clinging to their very bones that, did anyone speak to them, he was directly struck with a mortal sickness from which there was no escape."³⁹ By early November, the plague had spread through all of Sicily before being carried to the mainland in January of 1348.⁴⁰

Although an accurate death toll is impossible to tally 650 years after a catastrophe, it is estimated that one third to one half of those who inhabited Europe were killed by the Black Death.⁴¹ However, this is an overall estimate; the mortality rate in localized areas ranged from one fifth to nine tenths.⁴² The Sienese chronicler Agnolo di Tura recorded that "so many died that all believed it was the end of the world."⁴³ In fact, if the lower estimate that one third of the population died is accurate, this would mean that about 20 million Europeans died; if one half is correct, then approximately 30

³⁷ Gottfried, 37. This may be a legend, as current knowledge of the plague tells us it is more likely that their rodent populations infected each other.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 35-42.

³⁹ Francis Aidan Gasquet, *The Great Pestilence (A.D. 1348-1349), Now Commonly Known as The Black Death* (London: Simpkin Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., Ltd, 1893), 12-13.

⁴⁰ Gottfried, 42.

⁴¹ Tenner and Schamess, 6; Aberth, 3. Some estimates are as high as 60%, such as that of Benedictow, 383.

⁴² Tuchman, 98.

⁴³ Gottfried, 45. When reading contemporary accounts, one must always keep in mind a medieval person's tendency to exaggerate.

million died. In Avignon, 400 died daily; in Paris, 800, in Pisa, 500, in Vienna, 500 to 600.⁴⁴ The numbers are so great that they are beyond comprehension. How would and how could the United States of America cope with the death of half of the population – about 150 million people – in the year 2007?⁴⁵ Death was so extensive that frequently there were not enough clergy to administer last rites to the sick.⁴⁶ From his abbey at Leicester, Henry Knighton wrote that “of the English Austin Friars at Avignon, not one remained...at Maguelonne, of 160 friars, 7 only were left...at Marseilles, of 150 Franciscans, not one survived to tell the story.”⁴⁷ In response, the Bishop of Bath and Wells released an appeal in 1348 that stated: “On the verge of death, if they cannot have a duly ordained priest, they shall in some way make confession to each other...even to a layman, or, in default of him, to a woman.”⁴⁸ If death aroused fear in Christians, then a death without last rites unleashed terror, for a “good” death meant reunion with Christ, while a “bad” death meant eternal suffering in the fires of hell. Not only were priests difficult to find, but how does a community bury so many dead bodies? As a judge at Padua recorded, “the bodies even of nobles remained unburied.”⁴⁹ In Avignon, 11,000 bodies were buried within a six-week period.⁵⁰ The numbers of dead became so vast that the pope resorted to consecrating the Rhone River; many were interred in this watery grave. And who was left to care for the sick, when twenty of the twenty-four doctors of

⁴⁴ Tuchman, 98-99.

⁴⁵ These population statistics are from the 2006 United States census.

⁴⁶ Aberth, 164. This was not always the case, as the *Great Chronicle* of France from 1348 says that “even though they died in such numbers, everyone received confession and their other sacraments.”

⁴⁷ G. G. Coulton, *The Black Death* (London: Ernest Benn LTD, 1929), 59-60. The clergy were more affected than average populations because of the close living quarters of convents and monasteries.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 45. The Bishop also said that if one should recover, one was obligated to confess the same sins again, but this time to a priest.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵⁰ Tuchman, 98.

Venice died within the first month of the plague's sweep through the city?⁵¹

Unfortunately, the extensive mortality caused by the Black Death affected medieval life so greatly that a full discussion of its every aspect far exceeds the scope of this thesis. However, the profound impact of the Black Death leaves no room for doubting that it affected the art of the era.

In subsequent outbreaks of plague, the mortality was much lower, at an average of 10 to 20%.⁵² Although these outbreaks were more localized, the continual recurrence in the years previously mentioned forced medieval people to accept plague as a part of life. It seemed as though once society began to recover, it would be struck down yet again. It can be assumed that with subsequent outbreaks of plague those affected would consider the past and expect a death toll equivalent to that of the Black Death. The sparse population around them served as a constant reminder that there had recently been many more.⁵³ Some who may have been quite young when they witnessed the carnage of the Black Death would have lived on into the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, with indelible images from their youth affecting their later life. Humanity was forced to live with the constant threat of widespread, sudden death. The effects of the Black Death, especially when combined with the effects of later outbreaks, were long-lasting.

Despite its virulence, each outbreak of plague eventually ended. The outbreaks of plague ceased for two reasons. First of all, so many died that there were not enough hosts for *Y. pestis* to maintain itself.⁵⁴ Acquired immunity is the other reason for each

⁵¹ Tenner and Schames, 6.

⁵² Gottfried, 129-134.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 134. Demographic growth did not resume until the mid-fifteenth century.

⁵⁴ Benedictow, 19.

outbreak's seemingly abrupt end.⁵⁵ It was noted by the Emperor of Constantinople, John Cantacuzene, that "the few who recovered had no second attack, or at least not of a serious nature."⁵⁶

The scientific facts about the Black Death that have been presented in this thesis would have seemed as absurd to medieval people as their beliefs about the cause of the Black Death seem to modern people. A small bacillus that entered the body through a flea bite, but could not be seen with the human eye, would have been more difficult for medieval people to comprehend than the final death toll. Conversely, it is nearly impossible for modern people to rid their minds of knowledge to truly understand medieval people's experience. In search of an explanation, medieval people focused on a variety of factors that were thought to cause the Black Death.

Although medieval people had some sense that the plague was contagious, or that one acquired it from being near the sick, it was not viewed as a medical problem. This was affirmed by the ineffectiveness of doctors' actions to prevent death and halt the spread of the plague. As recorded by Giovanni Boccaccio, "to the cure of these maladies nor counsel of physician nor virtue of any medicine appeared to avail or profit aught...the ignorance of the physicians availed not to know whence it arose and consequently took not due measures thereagainst."⁵⁷ Like much of the upper class, many doctors fled plague-stricken areas. Though some viewed this as a cowardly action, their flight would prove inconsequential, as Gui de Chauliac observed that even those doctors who stayed "did not visit the sick for fear of being infected: and when they visited them, they did not

⁵⁵ Gottfried, 4.

⁵⁶ Gasquet, 11.

⁵⁷ Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (Privately printed, 1920), 2.

make them well, and gained nothing: for all the sick died.”⁵⁸ A few proposed plans of defense actually helped, such as quarantines and sanitation laws, but this was due to chance and not the result of a true understanding of how the plague was transmitted.⁵⁹ Though medicine was nearly ineffectual against the plague, the abundance of medical treatises released by doctors lends insight into contemporary perceptions of the plague.⁶⁰ The search for an explanation “played into a popular psychological need to maintain human control over such an extraordinary disease.”⁶¹ Some of these perceived causes and remedies were represented in the art of the period.

Because of its great authority, one of the most widely accepted theories of the time was that released on October 6, 1348, by the medical faculty at the University of Paris upon the request of Philip VI, king of France.⁶² Citing authorities such as Hippocrates, Ptolemy, Albertus Magnus, and falsely citing Aristototele, the compendium released by these professionals reflects the height of knowledge in the fourteenth century. About the universal and distant cause, it was said:

The distant and first cause of this pestilence was and is a certain configuration in the heavens. In the year of our Lord 1345...there was a major conjunction of three higher planets in Aquarius. Indeed, this conjunction...being the present cause of the ruinous corruption of the air that is all around us, is a harbinger of mortality and famine.⁶³

About the particular and near cause, the compendium claims:

We believe that the present epidemic or plague originated from air that was corrupt in its substance...air, which is pure and clear by nature, does not putrefy or become corrupt unless it is mixed up with something else, that is, with evil

⁵⁸ Tenner and Schames, 7. This is not exactly true, as some did survive the infection, including Gui de Chauliac.

⁵⁹ Aberth, 39.

⁶⁰ None of these treatises correctly identifies the cause of the Black Death.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

vapors...[which] have come about through the configurations [of the planets], the aforesaid universal and distant cause.⁶⁴

They also asserted that certain prognostications and signs preceded the plague:

Changes of the seasons are a great source of plagues. Therefore we speak from experience when we say that for some time now the seasons have not been regular...there have been seen very many vapor trails and flare-ups, such as a comet and shooting stars...the color of the heavens has customarily appeared yellowish and the sky turned red...there has been much lightning and frequent flashes, thunder and wind so violent...powerful earthquakes. All these things seem to come from a great rottenness of the air and land.⁶⁵

As absurd as these explanations appear, the physicians in Paris did convey some understanding of the disease when they said that “no small part of the cause of sicknesses is the condition of the patient’s body.”⁶⁶ They went on to recommend a “good” regimen that is devoid of such things as sex, bathing, excessive exercise, and excessive body fat. They were honest about the effectiveness of these defenses, stating that “truly, those who become sick will not escape, except the very few.”⁶⁷ Most importantly for art, the faculty at Paris thought God had caused the plague. “What is more, we should not neglect to mention that an epidemic always proceeds from the divine will, in which case there is no other counsel except that one should humbly turn to God...who never denies His aid.”⁶⁸ Many of the educated and especially the uneducated masses would have readily accepted a statement from such a high authority as the absolute truth. Placing the cause in the hands of God had repercussions in the religious art created after the Black Death.

Many other treatises were published, most of which were not intended for medical communities, but rather for the aid of the general population, as indicated by the use of

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

the vernacular instead of Latin.⁶⁹ The advice of those at the University of Paris is mirrored in these, especially the advice that one must turn to God. The earliest plague treatise, which was written by Jacme D'Agramont in Spain one month before the plague devastated the area, gives advice intended as prevention only. The treatise omits medical advice, suggesting that if prevention fails and one becomes ill, then one must turn to God, because "if the corruption and putrefaction of the air has come because of our sins, the remedies of the medical art are of little value, for only He who binds can unbind."⁷⁰ Some acknowledge God's role, but still have an understanding of the role that contagion played in spreading this affliction. A doctor from the Muslim kingdom of Granada in Spain said, "the best thing we learn from extensive experience is that if someone comes into contact with a diseased person, he immediately is smitten with the same disease, with identical symptoms."⁷¹ According to him, the disease's mode of transmission is "a law which God imposed in this matter."⁷² In addition to actions recommended by the University of Paris, bloodletting or phlebotomy, sweet smells, sleep, abstinence from carnal pleasures such as overeating, fleeing from the afflicted area, and fire were all recommended as defenses against the plague.⁷³ Pope Clement VI's physician, Gui de Chauliac, requested that great fires encircle the holy man. This action was effective until fear drove the pope to flee Avignon. Despite such an authority's reliance on fire as a defense against the plague, I do not know of an increase in the depiction of fire in art after the Black Death.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 39 and 51.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 51. This was written on April 24, 1348; plague hit in May.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 37-66.

Some medical treatises offered new advice, such as that of Gentile da Foligno, a highly respected doctor who died from plague in 1348.⁷⁴ He recommended that one ingest “select wines, so that men may live in good cheer as they give vent to their fear.”⁷⁵ Belief in the power of good cheer was shared by D’Agramont, who declared “that in such times gaiety and joyousness are most profitable...[for] it is evidently very dangerous and perilous in times of pestilence to imagine death and to have fear.”⁷⁶ The simple fact that such authors address a need to conquer fear conveys to us concretely that the populace was terrified; there is no need for us to speculate.

In addition to these medical treatises, numerous contemporary writings aid in our understanding of the psychological state of man, thereby helping us to understand how this state affected art. The consistency of their descriptions is remarkable – fear and death were everywhere. Even suspicions that the medieval tendency to exaggerate is at play are put to rest by the words of Francesco Petrarch. In a letter from May of 1349 he said, “O happy people of the next generation, who will not know these miseries and most probably will reckon our testimony as fable!”⁷⁷ Petrarch described an environment of “empty houses, derelict cities, ruined estates, fields strewn with cadavers, [and] a horrible and vast solitude encompassing the whole world.”⁷⁸ “I cannot say this without shedding many tears,” said Petrarch, who inquired:

Where are our sweet friends now? Where are the beloved faces? What abyss swallowed them? Once we were all together, now we are quite alone. We should make new friends, but where or with whom, when the human race is nearly

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

extinct, and it is predicted that the end of the world is soon at hand? We are – why pretend? – truly alone.⁷⁹

The Sienese chronicler Agnolo di Tura mimicked these laments: “There are not words to describe how horrible these events have been... [I] have buried five of my sons with my own hands.”⁸⁰

Even Gui de Chauliac, who “was a sober, careful observer,” recorded widespread death, fear, and abandonment.⁸¹ He observed that “the father did not visit his son, nor the son his father. Charity was dead and hope destroyed.”⁸² Boccaccio echoed this phenomenon of abandonment in the introduction to *The Decameron*: “[T]his tribulation had stricken such terror to the hearts of all, men and women alike, that brother forsook brother, uncle nephew and sister brother and oftentimes wife husband; nay (what is yet more extraordinary and well nigh incredible) fathers and mothers refused to visit or tend their very children.”⁸³

These dramatic accounts contradict some scholars’ opinion that medieval people were too accustomed to witnessing death for the Black Death to have greatly affected them. Certainly there were a variety of individual reactions and many parents died with their children, but it is astonishing that the fear was so great as to override familial bonds. Men and women were so frightened that they abandoned their own children in direct opposition to the evolutionary instinct to secure the propagation of their genes; for many, one’s own survival was paramount. Where these reactions appear to be apathetic, they are actually indicative of strong emotional reactions – reactions so profound that the only

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸¹ Tuchman, 101.

⁸² Tenner and Schames, 8.

⁸³ Boccaccio, 5.

way to cope emotionally was to adopt this apathetic outlook, to enclose oneself in a protective shell. We can learn more about these reactions through comparison to modern accounts, such as the writings of Viktor Frankl.⁸⁴ Although Frankl lived during the twentieth century, his observations are applicable to the fourteenth century, for although societies and historical contexts may change, man's existence as an animal makes certain emotions that are biologically based both timeless and universal.

In contemporary accounts of the plague, writers observe the unexpected reactions of those who witnessed the horror. Agnolo noted that "no one weeps for any of the dead, for instead everyone awaits their own impending death."⁸⁵ Another chronicler wrote, "And in these days was burying without sorrowe and wedding without friendschippe."⁸⁶ Boccaccio observed that "more often than not bereavement was the signal for laughter and witticisms and general jollification."⁸⁷ Recently, Frankl wrote that in the Nazi concentration camps, "most of us were overcome by a grim sense of humor."⁸⁸ About this reaction, he observed that "an abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior."⁸⁹ There is also a parallel between the flight from the plague that some contemporaries viewed as cowardly and the observations of Frankl. When arriving at the death camps, Frankl noted that "there was neither time nor desire to consider moral or ethical issues. Every man was controlled by one thought only: to keep himself alive."⁹⁰ The parallels between fourteenth- and twentieth-century observations of man's reaction

⁸⁴ Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who was imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps for three years. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, he presents a remarkable perspective on the psychology of survival.

⁸⁵ Aberth, 81.

⁸⁶ Tuchman, 100.

⁸⁷ Aberth, 78.

⁸⁸ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 29.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

to being surrounded by death reinforce the accuracy of fourteenth-century accounts by diminishing their perceived exaggerations.

The Black Death was a watershed event in history; in the late Middle Ages everything could be categorized as happening either before the plague or after the plague. After the Black Death, there was no choice but to keep moving forward. The Florentine chronicler Matteo Villani observed that those who survived the plague “forgot the past as though it had never been.”⁹¹ In the wake of horror, Frankl’s experiences were similar. He relates the story of watching a corpse being dragged to a mass grave: “The corpse which had just been removed stared in at me with glazed eyes. Two hours before I had spoken to that man. Now I continued sipping my soup. If my lack of emotion had not surprised me from the standpoint of professional interest, I would not remember this incident now, because there was so little feeling involved in it.”⁹² Adopting apathy as a protective mechanism caused survivors of the Black Death literally to forget what happened, or at least temporarily to block it from their conscious memory. It can be inferred that this is one reason why there is not much plague imagery in years immediately after the Black Death, but that imagery began to appear more in the third quarter of the fourteenth century and later. Although subsequent outbreaks of plague greatly affected survivors, the comparative mildness of later outbreaks would not have induced the same psychological defenses. Though it was terrible and fear-inducing, the plague became integrated into daily life and people grew accustomed to it.

Regarding the history of art, the great tragedy of 1348 and later epidemics are not mutually exclusive. If the Black Death had not occurred, then the outbreaks of plague in

⁹¹ Coulton, 67.

⁹² Frankl, 35.

later years would have been perceived as merely another disease. If the plague had not returned, then the catastrophe of 1348 would have been nearly erased from memory. In both scenarios, plague imagery would appear less frequently in art. A twentieth-century example of the effects of a single pandemic enforces this point. Over 30 million people worldwide lost their lives to the Spanish influenza between August of 1918 and March of 1919; over half a million of these deaths were in America. In *America's Forgotten Pandemic*, Alfred Crosby notes that the "important and almost incomprehensible fact about Spanish influenza is that it killed millions upon millions of people in a year or less...and yet it has never inspired awe."⁹³ As the title of his book suggests, Americans wiped this catastrophe from their memory, and "the average college graduate born since 1918 literally knows more about the Black Death of the fourteenth century than the World War I [influenza] pandemic."⁹⁴ Through his exploration of contemporary accounts, he observes that Americans were greatly affected by the flu pandemic and "often acknowledge it as one of the most influential experiences of their lives."⁹⁵ However, American literature after the pandemic, even works by authors who were directly affected by influenza, rarely mentions the flu and still more rarely elaborates on the subject.⁹⁶

If the words of Agnolo di Tura can be taken as representative of the population, then medieval people were not only forced to move forward, but also eager to do so. Agnolo recorded that "these conditions have been so horrible that I do not reflect as often as I used to about the situation. I have thought so much about these events that I cannot

⁹³ Alfred W. Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 311.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 314-315.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 315-319.

tell the stories any longer.”⁹⁷ Those few who survived celebrated their lives after the plague ceased.⁹⁸ However, Agnolo recorded that “now, no one knows how to put their life back in order.”⁹⁹ Indeed, normal life had come to a halt during the plague.¹⁰⁰ With this striving to move forward there developed a great sense of hope. Although individual reactions ranged widely – some lived “unconventional, irresponsible, or self-indulgent” lives while others lived with “a more intense piety or religious excitement” – optimistic attitudes stimulated increased production of some religious imagery after the Black Death, especially devotional images of saints.¹⁰¹

During and immediately after the Black Death, art was rarely produced, and “most of the trades disappeared.”¹⁰² When production of art revived fully, it did not always contain the gruesome images that might be expected in the wake of such horror. The psychological reactions discussed above explain this unexpectedly low frequency of gruesome imagery in art of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. People wanted and needed to move on from this tragedy, which is why plague art conveys hope more frequently than it conveys despair. There was no desire to relive these horrors through viewing nightmarish images that had recently been reality.

Millard Meiss observed that after the Black Death, art was “pervaded by a profound pessimism.”¹⁰³ He cited the great fresco cycle in the Camposanto at Pisa as a prime example, believing that the scenes of the *Triumph of Death*, the *Inferno*, and the

⁹⁷ Aberth, 81.

⁹⁸ Coulton, 66.

⁹⁹ Aberth, 82.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph P. Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2006), 3.

¹⁰¹ Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1951), 67.

¹⁰² Aberth, 87.

¹⁰³ Meiss, 74.

Last Judgment were executed around 1350.¹⁰⁴ In the *Triumph of Death* (fig. 4), some of the scenes can readily be associated with the Black Death. In the left corner is a scene of three living men confronting three dead men whose bodies are in various stages of decay: one has recently perished, one is bloated, and the other is a skeleton. The representation of the corpses reveals an awareness of and fascination with decay and reminds the living of what they will one day become. On the right side of the *Triumph of Death* (fig. 5), ten



4. Master of the Triumph of Death, *Triumph of Death*, Pisa, Camposanto.

young courtiers relax and enjoy life in an orchard, unaware of a personification of death who is swooping down toward them to end their pleasure. This is readily comparable to the speed and indiscrimination of the Black Death, in which young and old, rich and poor died. A group of sick and handicapped people beg Death to relieve them of their suffering (fig. 6), imploring, “Since prosperity has left us, Death, the medicine for all pains, come now to give us our last supper.”¹⁰⁵ But despite the macabre images and

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* Scholars still debate the authorship of these frescoes, which have most often been attributed to Francesco Traini, Buffalmacco, or to an anonymous Master of the Triumph of Death.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Polzer, “The Role of the Written Word in the Early Frescoes in the Campo Santo of Pisa,” *World Art* Vol. II (1989), 364: “Da che prosperitade ci a lasciati Morte, medicina d’ongni pena, de vieni a darci omai l’ultima cena!” Variations of the same inscription appear in two other versions of the *Triumph of Death* brought to my attention by Mark Zucker: a fragmentary fresco by Orcagna at Santa Croce in Florence, dated to the 1350s (Robert Oertel, *Early Italian Painting to 1400*, London: Thames and Hudson,

depictions of leprosy, there are no direct references to the plague. There are no blotches or buboes on any of the living or the dead which might directly indicate plague.



5. Master of the Triumph of Death, *Triumph of Death* (detail), Pisa, Camposanto.



6. Master of the Triumph of Death, *Triumph of Death* (detail), Pisa, Camposanto.

1968, pl. 104); and an anonymous Florentine engraving of the 1460s (Mark Zucker, *The Illustrated Bartsch* 24 [*Early Italian Masters*], New York: Abaris Books, 1980, p. 96).

Thus the fresco is certainly about death, but not about death by plague. Recent scholarship supports a completion date in the late 1330s, almost a decade prior to the Black Death.¹⁰⁶ Instead of being a prime example of plague art, as Meiss believed, the fresco is a prime example of people's growing fascination with the macabre before they thought an event like the Black Death was possible. According to Boeckl, "the frightful experience of the Black Death coincided with an already noticeable preoccupation with human mortality."¹⁰⁷ Scholars disagree on exactly when this commenced, but it was certainly before 1348.¹⁰⁸ The Black Death served to augment an awareness that already existed.

The medieval fascination with death did not appear immediately, but developed slowly. The individualistic ideals that reached their height in the Renaissance had their genesis centuries earlier. For example, in the early fourteenth-century work of Giotto at the Arena Chapel in Padua, the artist shows a keen awareness of each individual as being a separate entity with a unique human reaction. In the scene *Joachim Takes Refuge in the Wilderness* (figs. 7a-b), Giotto conveys the humiliation of Joachim through his body language; Joachim gazes downward with his arms folded in his cloak as a defensive gesture. In the shepherd's tense face and sideways glance, the viewer immediately recognizes uncertainty and can imagine the wordless, visual communication between him and the other shepherd, whose back faces the viewer. The realization that all people are separate and distinct individuals led to an interest in how each person suffers his or her

¹⁰⁶ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, 6th ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. and Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2007), 129.

¹⁰⁷ Boeckl, *Images*, 69.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

own death. With this new consciousness came a fascination with what happened to the individual after death, both body and soul.



7a. Giotto, *Joachim Takes Refuge in the Wilderness*, Arena Chapel, Padua.



7b. Giotto, *Joachim Takes Refuge in the Wilderness* (detail), Arena Chapel, Padua.

One of the primary reasons for this new-found interest in the macabre was a change in church doctrine brought about by a papal bull issued by Pope Benedict XII in 1336. Benedict XII, the third Avignon pope, held the papal seat from 1334 to 1342 and was renowned for his scholarly achievements.¹⁰⁹ His *bull*, *Benedictus Deus*, asserted that after death the individual soul was immediately judged once, and then again in an ultimate judgment at the end of time – the Last Judgment. This *bull* was a response to his predecessor, John XXII, who believed there was only one judgment at the end of

¹⁰⁹ Christine M. Boeckl, “The Pisan *Triumph of Death* and the Papal Constitution *Benedictus Deus*,” *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 18, No. 36 (1997), 55. Clement VI was the pope during the Black Death (1342-1352).

time, before which all souls rested. For John XXII to assert that the Beatific Vision, or face-to-face encounter with God the Father, would not occur for the saved until the Last Judgment was heresy.¹¹⁰ This disagreement within the church became an emotionally charged debate, causing much controversy. Medieval people were passionately concerned with the destiny of the individual after death, as Dante demonstrates so strikingly in his *Divine Comedy*, completed around 1320. However, this particular debate had been long-standing, finding its origins in doctrinal differences between the Greek and Latin Churches. John XXII's beliefs were consistent with those of the Greek Church, while Benedict XII's *bull*a affirmed the dogma of the Latin Church. According to the latter, immediately after death the soul was judged and either entered heaven for the Beatific Vision or was damned to the fires of hell. Following the Last Judgment, the soul was reunited with the resurrected body and the individual's experiences would become more profound: the blessed experienced increased bliss, while the damned endured more intense suffering in the fires of hell.¹¹¹

Benedict XII's *bull*a marked a watershed in the history of the Church.¹¹² After the *bull*a, there was a greater emphasis on the importance of the soul, since the physical body was no longer needed to house the soul until the Last Judgment. The new-found insignificance of the physical body led to an interest in the body's decay and the appearance in art of the *transi*, or a decaying corpse.¹¹³ As Michael Camille put it, the *transi* "embodied in a static image the process of becoming nothing."¹¹⁴ *Transis* became

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 56-57. Benedict XII's *bull*a remains the doctrine of the Catholic Church.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹³ Aberth, 169. *Transi* is from the Latin word *transpire*, which means to die.

¹¹⁴ Michael Camille, *Master of Death: The Lifeless Art of Pierre Remet Illuminator* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 176.

continuing reminders of the impending judgment of man's soul. When the Black Death struck twelve years after Benedict XII's *bull*a, his writings affected people's perceptions of the post-mortem body. Also, in the wake of the Black Death people witnessed decaying corpses more than ever before. Not only were there not enough living to bury the dead, but some buried corpses did not remain interred. Agnolo di Tura wrote that "wolves and other wild beasts eat the improperly buried."¹¹⁵ In addition, most people were exposed to corpses in various stages of decay, which allowed for greater realism in the portrayal of the *transi*.

The effects of Benedict XII's *bull*a were compounded by the concept of purgatory, or a place between heaven and hell.¹¹⁶ Although the Latin Church had incorporated purgatory in its dogma since the Second Council of Lyon in 1274 and 1275, the concept became more important after the *bull*a affirmed that there would be a time after death and the first judgment during which the soul could wait for redemption until the final judgment, which would determine the soul's perpetual destination. While in purgatory, the prayers and good deeds of those still alive could cleanse the deceased's soul. Many died without last rites during the Black Death, so the concept of purgatory gave people hope that the souls of the dead could still achieve salvation. From the 1350s onward, papal orders stressed the importance of indulgences, or particular amounts of time subtracted from one's required stay in purgatory.¹¹⁷ Indulgences could be gained through good deeds, prayers, monetary donations, or material gifts such as art.¹¹⁸ Due to the nature of plague, whole families usually died, leaving no one to remember the souls

¹¹⁵ Aberth, 82.

¹¹⁶ Boeckl, *Images*, 74. *Benedictus Deus* does not specifically mention purgatory.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹¹⁸ Gottfried, 88.

that needed help in purgatory. This circumstance led to an increase in bequests to the Church before death to ensure remembrance and a blissful afterlife.¹¹⁹ For example, the last will and testament of Libertus of Monte Feche was drawn up in Arezzo on September 21, 1348, after being dictated by the man who was dying of plague. He designated his burial location before listing specific amounts of money to be left to five different religious institutions and churches. To one of these, the church of Saint Anthony of Tragetto, Libertus specified that the money left should be used to commission a portrait of himself to be placed within the church.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Boeckl, *Images*, 74.

¹²⁰ Aberth, 109.

Chapter Three

Art after the Plague

The Black Death of 1348 changed every aspect of life in Europe, including the production of art. For the purpose of this thesis, the definition of “plague art” is multifaceted. Some plague art contains gruesome imagery that was directly influenced by the mortality of the plague or by the medieval fascination with the macabre and awareness of death that were augmented by the plague. Some plague art documents psychosocial responses to the fear that plague aroused in its victims. Other plague art is of a subject that directly responds to people’s reliance on religion to give them hope. It could be argued that all art created after 1348 is “plague art,” as mortality was so extensive and repetitive that it affected every artist and every patron. However, to remain within the scope of this thesis, all art discussed contains imagery that can be linked directly with the Black Death of 1348 or subsequent outbreaks of plague; such things as overall changes in style and workshop practice will not be addressed.

The most recurring symbol found within works of art influenced by the Black Death is the arrow, an ancient symbol of divine punishment. It can be linked with Apollo, “one who both sends and averts the arrows of pestilence.”¹²¹ In the Old Testament, Job comments on God’s punishment, saying, “The arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me” (Job 6:4). God responds to Job: “I will make my arrows drunk with blood” (Deut. 32:41-42). In Deuteronomy 32:23, God says: “I will spend mine arrows upon them.” The arrow as a

¹²¹ Louise Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994), 493.

symbol of plague is reinforced via the absence of a bow in most plague art, as the arrow cannot be an effective weapon without its companion. The lance and the sword are two other weapons associated with the plague.¹²² A vision of Saint Dominic described in the *Golden Legend* relates the lance to God's punishments. God was angry with the world for the prominence of three vices: pride, avarice, and lust. In the saint's vision, God threatened to destroy the world with three lances.¹²³ Consequently, arrows, swords, and lances are sometimes depicted in groups of three.

In the small town of Lavaudieu, France, the church of St-André was decorated with a fresco in 1355.¹²⁴ *The Black Death* (fig. 8) is badly deteriorated, but one can still make out the plague imagery in the composition. In the center stands a personification



8. Anonymous, *The Black Death*, Lavaudieu, France, St-André.

of the Black Death – a woman who grips bundles of arrows in each hand. She is flanked by dense groups of plague victims whose garments indicate they are from a variety of

¹²² Boeckl, *Images*, 46.

¹²³ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, Vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 47.

¹²⁴ Patrick Pollefeys, www.lamortdanslart.com. (2006).

occupations and social ranks. The artist certainly witnessed the devastating effects of the Black Death first hand, as made evident not only by the early date, but because the arrows of plague puncture the victims in the locations where buboes distend.

Buboes

The Toggenburg Bible, now in Berlin, was created at Lichtensteig, Switzerland, in 1411.¹²⁵ One miniature from this manuscript shows a man and woman whose bodies are covered with buboes (fig. 9). They appear to be near death as they lie in bed, while behind them a man with outstretched arms looks upward and gestures in prayer. The



9. Anonymous, *Toggenburg Bible*, Lichtensteig, Switzerland, now in Berlin.

representation of buboes seen here is inaccurate, as they were confined to the lymph nodes. The affliction depicted in the Toggenburg Bible was an attempt at representing the full-body hemorrhaging that was another symptom of the plague. A similar representation of plague afflictions is found in an English manuscript of ca. 1350 (fig. 10).¹²⁶ In this image, a bishop blesses a group of plague-stricken monks. As previously stated, the cloistered orders were greatly affected by the Black Death because their close living quarters created a habitat conducive to sharing the infection.

¹²⁵ Campbell Dodgson, "The Invention of Wood-Engraving: A French Claim Considered," *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 8 (Nov., 1903), 209.

¹²⁶ British Library Royal MS 6.E.vi f. 301, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk.



10. Anonymous, English Manuscript, London, British Library.

A more accurate representation of a bubo can be seen in a detail of Josse Lieferinxe's painting *St. Sebastian Intercedes during the Plague in Pavia*, of 1497-1499 (fig. 11). In this painting, which will be discussed in depth later, a victim of the plague lies on the ground. With his anguished face and outstretched arms, he is clearly on the verge of death. His head is tilted to his left, revealing a cervical bubo. This characteristic tilt of the head away from the swollen lymph node was an attempt to relieve the pain



11. Josse Lieferinxe, *St. Sebastian Intercedes during the Plague in Pavia*, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery.

caused by the pressure of swelling. The accuracy of this portrayal reveals that the artist probably had seen plague victims with his own eyes.¹²⁷

Medical treatises released in the wake of the plague recommended that buboes be opened to let the infection out of the body. In Granada, the Muslim physician and poet Abu Khatima advised others to be certain that the buboes were mature before cutting them, meaning that the blood in them had changed to pus. If they were lanced before they matured, the victim would bleed to death. Khatima relates the story of a man who was in such pain that he took his own razor to his bubo and immediately bled to death.¹²⁸ Cutting as a treatment can be seen in a woodcut from 1482 (fig. 12).¹²⁹ The image



12. Anonymous, Woodcut.

illustrates a physician lancing an axillary bubo on his patient. The scene is tender, as the physician wraps his arm around the unclothed patient, who looks back at the physician. In a detail of *St. Roch Cured by an Angel*, ca. 1490, the same treatment is represented (fig. 13). St. Roch moves his clothing to the side to reveal a femoral bubo, which an

¹²⁷ Boeckl, *Images*, 21.

¹²⁸ Aberth, 61-62.

¹²⁹ Tenner and Schamess, 6.



13. Anonymous, *St. Roch Cured by an Angel* (detail), Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum.

angel delicately pierces. In the interest of modesty, the bubo is unrealistically low on St. Roch's thigh, not high and near his groin, where it would have been in reality (fig. 1). According to medical research, femoral buboes were the most common of the four types because fleas will bite a victim's exposed legs more frequently than other parts of the body.¹³⁰

Another detail of plague victims being treated can be found in an anonymous early sixteenth-century fresco in the Chapel of St. Sebastian in Lanslevillard (Savoy) (fig. 14).¹³¹ Here a physician is cutting a cervical bubo on a frightened woman, who is being held upright by a man who looks on with pity and wonder. Two more fearful patients wait for their treatment with their arms raised to relieve the pressure of their axillary buboes, a gesture already seen in Lieferinxe's painting, described above (fig. 11).

¹³⁰ Boeckl, *Images*, 21.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*



14. Anonymous, Fresco, Lanslevillard, Savoy, Chapel of St. Sebastian.

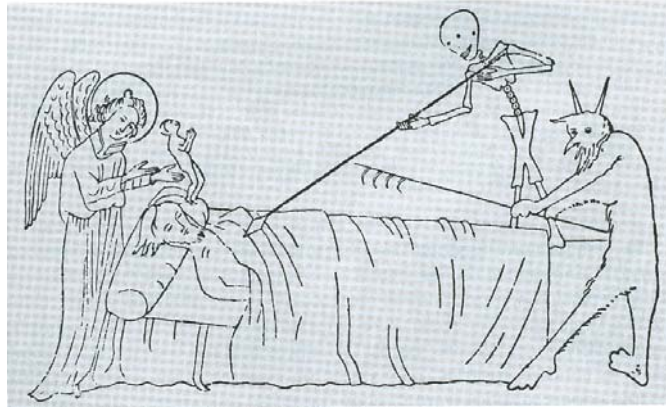
Death

Victims of the plague were concerned with a “good” death, or one that was free of sin and would lead to their salvation. In response, a genre of moral literature was developed by pastors and theologians, known as the *Art of Dying*, or *Ars moriendi*. Written in the vernacular, these manuscripts helped people to prepare for their own “good” death and ensure that their loved ones endured the same. A fifteenth-century English handbook typifies the genre. *The Craft of Dying* has five sections:

In the first the reader is reminded of the terrors of spiritual death and damnation. The second warns against typical temptations of the dying, such as impatience, unbelief, or spiritual despair. The third consists of questions regarding one’s spiritual fitness: belief in Christian doctrine; matters of conscience left unsettled; how one might live differently if he or she recovers. The fourth is a meditation on the power of Christ and the Crucifixion in allowing for salvation, and the fifth instructs bystanders on how best to help the dying person pass, with prayers, readings from Scripture, and presentation of pictures of Christ or the saints.¹³²

¹³² Byrne, *Daily Life*, 72.

The pages were often embellished with depictions of deathbeds, such as one example from a fourteenth-century English manuscript (fig. 15).¹³³ Death is represented as a skeleton holding a long, arrow-like spear – a symbol of the plague. A small human



15. Anonymous, English Manuscript.

figure, symbolizing the soul, floats away from the recently deceased man as he lies on his deathbed. An angel guides the soul and protects it from a devil, who stands at the foot of the bed with a rake-like weapon, ready to capture the soul and pull it toward him.



16. Gilles li Muisis, *Chronicle* (illustration), Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique.

The mortality of the Black Death was so extensive that burying the dead became problematic. In his *Chronicle* of 1350, Gilles li Muisis, abbot of the Benedictine monastery of St. Giles in Tournai, addresses the city ordinance that bodies be wrapped in

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

winding sheets and placed in lidded coffins. This action was to protect the living from the perceived “bad air” that was released by corpses.¹³⁴ An image from this chronicle also reflects how multiple corpses were interred simultaneously and the steady labor that was required of grave diggers (fig. 16).

Burials and other events related to the plague are illustrated in the *Belles Heures* of Jean, Duke of Berry. Jean de Berry commissioned the brothers Paul, Herman, and Jean de Limbourg to create the *Belles Heures* soon after the death of the Duke of Burgundy, Philippe le Hardi, in April 1404.¹³⁵ The book is unique in its display of text pages and illuminated pages; usually, illuminated pages are inserted between text pages, but in the *Belles Heures* the illuminations form uninterrupted series. The pictorial series concerning the plague includes the *Institution of the Great Litany*, the *Great Litany Procession*, the *End of the Plague*, and the *Procession of Flagellants*; only the first three will be discussed here (figs. 17-19).¹³⁶

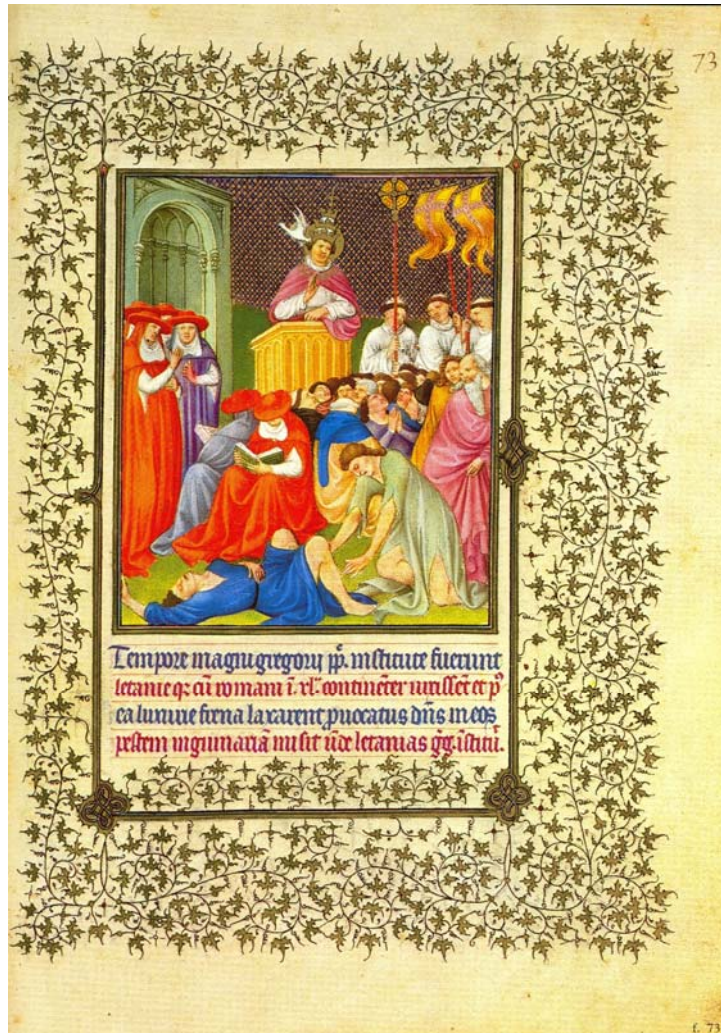
These three scenes are taken from *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, who describes a plague that was devastating Rome in 590. In an attempt to gain favor with God and avert the plague, Pope Gregory the Great organized processions behind an image of the Virgin and recited litanies with the people. It was said that despite their prayers, in any one-hour period ninety people died. Finally, Gregory witnessed an angel, St. Michael, wiping blood from a sword and sheathing it. Affirming Gregory’s interpretation, this action brought the plague to an end.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Boeckl, *Images*, 16.

¹³⁵ Millard Meiss and Elizabeth H. Beatson, *The Belles Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry: The Cloisters, The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1974), 11. The Limbourg brothers had been hired by Philippe to create a *Bible moralisée*.

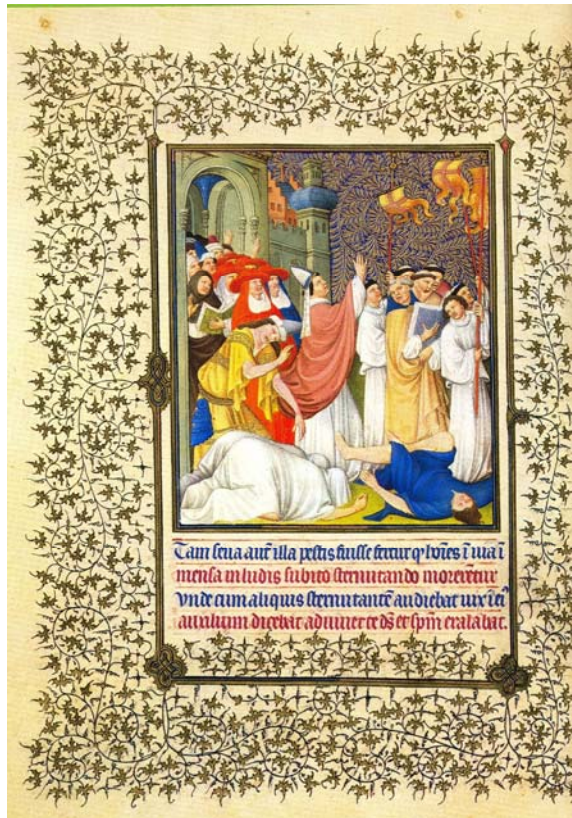
¹³⁶ The fourth scene in the series, the *Procession of Flagellants*, will be discussed later in this chapter.

¹³⁷ Voragine, 173-174.

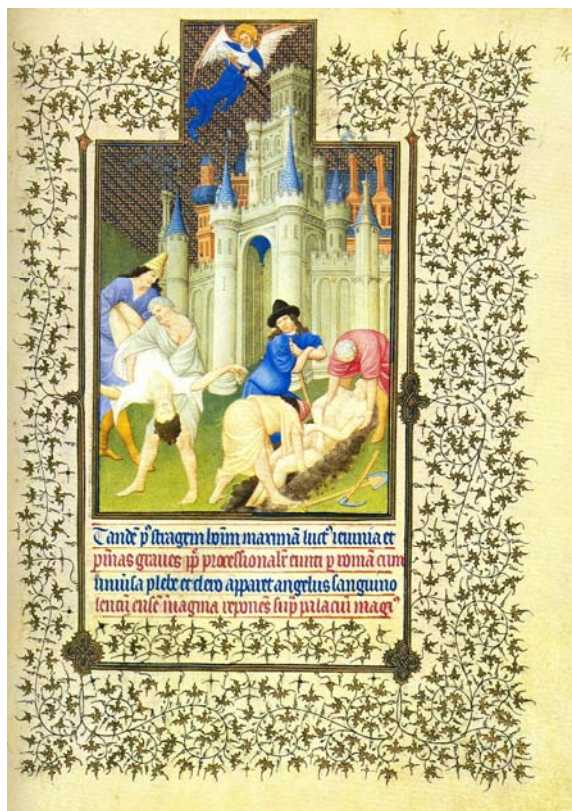


17. The Limbourg Brothers, *Institution of the Great Litany*, *Belles Heures*, New York, Cloisters.

The first image in the series, the *Institution of the Great Litany* (fig. 17), depicts Gregory relating to the crowd below him divinely inspired words from the dove of the Holy Spirit. In the foreground, an observer falls to the ground, one more casualty of plague. Another man falls to his knees with his arms outstretched toward the victim, while two observers move away from the dead man and shield themselves from his sickness. The next scene in the series, the *Great Litany Procession* (fig. 18), shows Pope Gregory raising his hands in prayer, while those who follow him look upward toward heaven. Only a few in the procession look down with open-mouthed awe at a man who has just dropped dead from the plague, while another man begins to bless the deceased.



18. The Limbourg Brothers, *Great Litany Procession*, *Belles Heures*, New York, Cloisters.



19. The Limbourg Brothers, *End of the Plague*, *Belles Heures*, New York, Cloisters.

The prayers of Pope Gregory and the Romans were answered, as the next scene in the *Belles Heures* is the *End of the Plague* (fig. 19). Here St. Michael sheaths his sword above an inaccurate depiction of Hadrian's mausoleum, now known as Castel Sant'Angelo. It was this action that ended the plague, and the action is consistent with standard plague iconography.¹³⁸ Since the arrow and the sword were often symbols of the plague, then the removal of such objects would symbolize the removal of the plague.¹³⁹ Below St. Michael, two pale and limp victims are being buried. That the grave diggers' work is exhausting is made known by one man who must rest on his shovel. He gazes at the second corpse being carried toward him, obviously distressed by the additional labor.



20. The Limbourg Brothers, *Procession of Saint Gregory*, *Très Riches Heures*, Chantilly, Musée Condé.

¹³⁸ Meiss and Beaton, Fol. 74.

¹³⁹ Boeckl, *Images*, 46.

Around 1414, Jean de Berry once again commissioned the Limbourg brothers to create a book of hours. The *Très Riches Heures* was executed in a style similar to the *Belles Heures*, but in this more mature work text is interspersed within the illuminations, some of which are bordered with charming figural motifs instead of foliage. The manuscript was incomplete when Jean de Berry and the Limbourg brothers died, but was finished by another artist, Jean Colombe, sometime in the 1480s. Colombe's hand is visible in facial expressions in the *Procession of Saint Gregory* (fig. 20), though the remaining painting is undoubtedly by the Limbourgs.¹⁴⁰

The *Procession of Saint Gregory* is consistent with the iconography taken from the *Golden Legend* and represented in the *Belles Heures*. A banner with an image of the Virgin leads the procession, which includes Pope Gregory raising his arms to the sky, beseeching St. Michael. This scene conflates various episodes of the procession, as St. Michael is sheathing his sword atop Hadrian's mausoleum, signaling the end of the plague, while at the same time men within the procession are still falling to the ground, victims of the plague. The normality of sudden death is made apparent in the reactions of bystanders, only a few of whom take the time to cast their eyes downward and see who has died.

Medieval people's growing fascination with the macabre and the *memento mori*, a reminder of death, is evident in a number of works of art that postdate 1348. The theme of three living men encountering three dead men appeared in painting before the Black Death, such as the frescoes of the Camposanto in Pisa (fig. 4), but emerged with more

¹⁴⁰ Jean Longnon and Millard Meiss, *The Très Riches Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry: Musée Condé, Chantilly* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1969), 20-22.

frequency after the calamity.¹⁴¹ One example of *The Three Quick and the Three Dead* decorates a wall in the tomb of the Castelnuevo family in Santa Maria, Vezzolano (fig. 21). The damaged fresco, from 1354, shows three men on horseback facing three corpses emerging from a tomb. The mounted men wildly react to the vision, throwing their hands into the air and grimacing, while their steeds rear back and neigh in anthropomorphic awareness. Consistent with standard iconography, the three corpses are in varying stages of decay: the central one has recently died, the left one's body has begun to decompose, and what is visible of the third reveals that only his bones remain. An intermediary looks at the living men as he moves his arm across his body to gesture toward the dead men. He displays a scroll bearing an inscription that reads: "Why are you proud, wretched ones? Think what we are. Think what you are. Here you will be, a thing which you can no way avoid."¹⁴²



21. Anonymous, *The Three Quick and the Three Dead*, Castelnuevo Tomb, Sta. Maria, Vezzolano.

¹⁴¹ Kathleen Cohen, *Metamorphosis of a Death Symbol: The Transi Tomb in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1973), 33. The story's origins lie in a late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century French poem, which itself was influenced by existing ideas.

¹⁴² Cohen, 36: "Quid superbitus miseri? Pensate quod sumus/Pensate quod estis/Hic eritis, quod minime vitare potestis."

The popularity of *The Three Quick and the Three Dead* resulted in a variety of representations of the theme. Another example is in the Sagro Speco, Subiaco (fig. 22). This late fourteenth-century fresco, like the one at Vezzolano, shows a bearded man looking at the live men as he gestures toward the corpses. Also like at Vezzolano, the dead men are in different stages of decay. However, in this version the three living take little notice of the forecast; only one man looks in the corpses' direction, but his eyes look up to meet the intermediary's instead of focusing on the macabre display. On the adjacent wall, the two other quick disregard the dead and interact with each other as large falcons – symbols of a courtly, leisure class – perch on their hands.¹⁴³



22. Anonymous, *The Three Quick and the Three Dead*, Sagro Speco, Subiaco.

A work by an anonymous south German master also serves to remind the living of what they will one day become (fig. 23a-b). The panel, datable to ca. 1470, features a

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 36. Similar birds distract courtiers from Death in the Camposanto (fig. 5).

happy bridal pair standing together in a lush garden; the images are probably portraits. Consistent with the overall theme, the flowers surrounding them indicate both love and death.¹⁴⁴ The pair makes eye contact as their hands move together to exchange a bouquet of flowers. The bridegroom's other hand embraces his bride, while her other hand



23a. Anonymous, *Bridal Pair* (Front), Cleveland Museum of Art.



23b. Anonymous, *Bridal Pair* (Back), Cleveland Museum of Art.

rests on her stomach, indicating the fertility that will come with the marriage. The reverse of the panel is decorated with a grotesque couple whose bodies are being devoured by reptiles and insects. They are standing despite the holes in their bodies, which have become a playground for snakes and worms, indicating that they are definitely dead. The panel serves as a reminder that even the beautiful, youthful, and happy will one day die and rot; death spares no one.

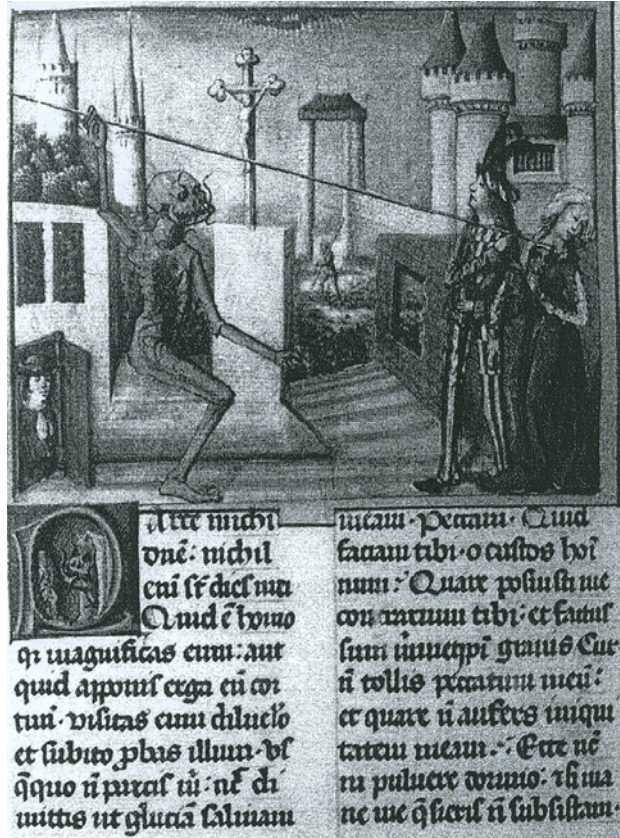
¹⁴⁴ Sherman E. Lee, *European Paintings Before 1500: Catalogue of Paintings: Part One* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1974), 35.

The awareness that death spares no one is again represented in the *London Hours of René of Anjou*, a book owned by the King of Naples. Millard Meiss dates the book to 1409-1410, around the time of René's birth, meaning that, like many other books of hours, it was not intended for the man who came to own it. When René acquired it sometime in the 1430s, it was personalized by the addition of five miniatures. One of these miniatures depicts René as *le-roi-mort* (fig. 24). The crowned corpse flaunts a scroll with legible text reading: "Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return."¹⁴⁵ Even the King of Naples will face death.



24. Anonymous, *Le Roi Mort*, *London Hours*, London, British Library.

¹⁴⁵ John Harthan, *The Book of Hours with a Historical Survey and Commentary* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1977), 92: "Memento homo quod cinis [cinis?] es in cinere reverteris."



25. Anonymous, *Death and a Young Couple*, *Office of the Dead*, *Breviary of Jost van Silenen*, Zürich, Schweizerisches Landesmuseum.

The Black Death took Europe by surprise. Young, healthy individuals could wake up one morning only to find themselves dead before the next. Images served as a reminder that one's soul must always be prepared for judgment. The suddenness of death is illustrated in the *Office of the Dead* from the *Breviary of Jost van Silenen*, 1493 (fig. 25).¹⁴⁶ In this illumination, a worm-infested corpse personifies death. He has only one foot out of an architectural niche, giving the impression that he has just emerged from concealment. He pierces the neck of a young woman with a long arrow, a common symbol of plague, as she casually strolls with her lover. It is significant that the arrow pierces the woman's neck, as this was often the site of buboes.

¹⁴⁶ Dagmar Eichberger, "Close Encounters with Death; Changing Representations of Women in Renaissance Art and Literature," Ch. 13, *Reading Texts and Images: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Art and Patronage in Honour of Margaret M. Manion* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 287.



26. Anonymous, *Disputacioun Betwyx the Body and Wormes* (illustration).

“In the ceson of huge mortality/Of sondre disseses with yet pestilence,” begins the English poem *Disputacioun Betwyx the Body and Wormes*, ca. 1435-1440.¹⁴⁷ This direct reference to plague is accompanied by an illustration of a double tomb with a woman’s dead but intact body above her worm-infested corpse (fig. 26). A reminder of the physical body’s fate, the image illustrates a section of the poem:

Take hede unto my figure here abowne
 And se how sumtyme I was fressche and gay
 Now turned to wormes mete and corrupcoun
 Bot fowle erth and stynkyng slyme and clay
 Attende perfore to this disputacioun written here
 And writte it wisely in thi herte fre

¹⁴⁷ Cohen, 29.

At therat sum wisdom thou may lere
To se what thou art and here aftyr sal be
When thou leste wenes, venit mors te superare
When thi grate grenes, bonum est mortis mediari.¹⁴⁸

Although this image dates to the fifteenth century, the idea was also popular in the fourteenth century, when the psychological state of people rarely allowed for such graphic imagery. A fourteenth-century monk preached a sermon at Regensburg in which he “contrasted the splendor of life with the ‘horrible image of death, with diverse worms, with toads on the head and snakes in the eyes, ears, and nose.’”¹⁴⁹ The ultimate lesson, however, was that at the Last Judgment the body would triumph over death and decay.¹⁵⁰

Transis

After the Black Death, funerary monuments became increasingly elaborate and appeared more frequently than before. This reflected people’s interest in being remembered and prayed for so that, even if one died unexpectedly and unprepared, and one’s soul was destined for purgatory, one could still attain salvation.¹⁵¹ Many effigies are paired with a contrasting *transi*, in a format similar to that of the illustration accompanying the poem *Disputacioun Betwyx the Body and Wormes*, where the intact body is above a macabre corpse. This representation can be viewed as an “anti-tomb,” making visible the image that tombs serve to conceal.¹⁵² Some *transi* tombs were commissioned before the individual perished, making one question why people would want their eternal memory to be maintained through such a repulsive image. The

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵⁰ Aberth, 171.

¹⁵¹ Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 160-161.

¹⁵² Aberth, 169.

awareness of death precipitated by the Black Death created an anxious society concerned with earthly actions, such as humility, that would ensure salvation; making one's effigy hideous is humble. According to Kathleen Cohen, "the strong sense of anxiety, the need to express humility, and the preoccupation with death united during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to form an emotional complex in which the *transi* could develop."¹⁵³



27. Anonymous, Tomb of François de la Sarra, La Sarraz, Switzerland.

The earliest extant *transi* tomb is that of François de la Sarra, a Swiss nobleman who died around 1363 (fig. 27). He is buried at the church of La Sarraz in Switzerland, in a chapel founded by him and his wife, Marie of Oron, in 1360. Some scholars, such as Herbert Reiners, believe that the tomb is contemporary with the founding of the chapel.¹⁵⁴ Stylistic influences lead others to believe it was erected by his grandsons in the

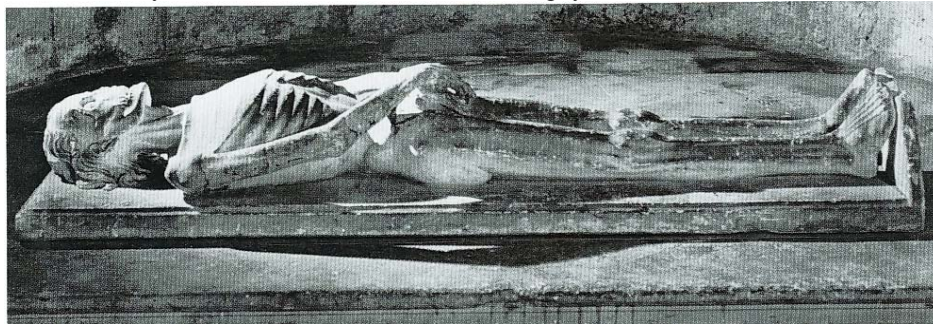
¹⁵³ Cohen, 48.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

1390s.¹⁵⁵ The *transi* is covered with snakes, accompanied by frogs that mask his face and genitals; worms emerge from François's rotting corpse. In fourteenth-century medical treatises, some physicians such as Gentile da Foligno and Jacme d'Agramont blame the plague on a "generation of worms" within the body.¹⁵⁶ Worms are also indicative of a concern with the Last Judgment and the resurrection of the body. In the Old Testament, Job says: "I know that my redeemer liveth...and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19:25-27).¹⁵⁷



28a. Anonymous, Tomb of Guillaume de Harcigny (detail), Laon Museum, Laon.



28b. Anonymous, Tomb of Guillaume de Harcigny, Laon.

¹⁵⁵ Aberth, 172.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Another early *transi* tomb is that of the French physician Guillaume de Harsigny at Laon (figs. 28a-b), who died in 1393. Here the *transi* is not infested with reptiles and insects. Instead, the idea of decay is related in the last two lines of the epitaph, which read: “To God and nature I give back in simple form what was composite by the grace of God.”¹⁵⁸



29a. Anonymous, Tomb of Cardinal Lagrange, Calvet Museum, Avignon.



29b. Anonymous, Tomb of Cardinal Lagrange (detail), Calvet Museum, Avignon.

¹⁵⁸ Cohen, 103-104, n. 20.

After Cardinal Jean de Lagrange's death in 1402, a monumental tomb was erected according to instructions left in his will, which was written twelve days before his death in Avignon (figs. 29a-b). The Cardinal requested that his bones be interred in Amiens and his flesh and entrails be buried under his tomb in Avignon, which defied a papal bull forbidding the dismemberment of corpses. A “tremendous pride [is] coupled with humility” in the stacked tomb, which includes a representation of the Cardinal in sacerdotal robes above a *transi*.¹⁵⁹ Directly above the emaciated corpse is an inscribed banner that reads:

We have been made a spectacle for the world so that the older and the younger may look clearly upon us, in order that they might see to what state they will be reduced. No one is excluded, regardless of estate, sex, or age. Therefore, miserable one, why are you proud? You are only ash, and you will revert, as we have done to a fetid cadaver, food and tidbits for worms, and ashes.¹⁶⁰



30. Anonymous, Tomb of Archbishop Henry Chichele, Canterbury Cathedral.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 13: “Spectaculum facti sumus mundo ut majores et minors/In nobis clare videant ad quem statum redigentur/Neminem excludendo, cujusvis status sexus vel aetatis/Ergo miser cur superbis?/Nam cinis es et in cadaver fetidum/Cibum et escam vermium ac cinerem/Sic et nos, revertis.”

The stacked funerary monument of Archbishop Henry Chichele in Canterbury Cathedral (fig. 30) is similar to Cardinal Lagrange's tomb in both the representations of the dead man and the inscription that circumscribes the tomb, which reads:

I was a pauper born, then to Primate raised
Now I am cut down and ready to be food for worms
Behold my grave
Whoever you may be who passes by,
I ask you to remember
You will be like me after you die;
All horrible, dust, worms, vile flesh.¹⁶¹

Along with the concern for the mortal body conveyed here, the Archbishop was concerned with the salvation of his soul. The tomb was commissioned in 1424 as part of his chantry chapel, nearly twenty years before his death in 1443. Emphasizing the function of the chapel, an inscription above the head of the *transi* reads: "May this gathering of the saints pray in harmony/That God may be propitious toward their merits."¹⁶²

Jews

Medieval people were desperate to know the origin of the Black Death so that they could take steps to protect themselves from the mortal illness. In their desperation, they chose the Jews as a scapegoat, believing that avenging the "sins of Jacob" would gain favor for them in the eyes of God.¹⁶³ Beginning in autumn of 1348, Jews were tortured until they falsely confessed to poisoning the wells. These accusations continued throughout the duration of the plague. Sometimes, Jews were offered forgiveness through baptism; more frequently, they were massacred or burned at the stake. The

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 16: "Pauper eram natus, post Primas hic elevatus/Iam sum prostrates et vermibus esca paratus/Ecce meum tumulum./Quisquis eris qui transieris rogo memoreris/Tu quod eris mihi consimilis qui post morieris/Omnibus horribilis, pulvis, vermis, caro vilis."

¹⁶² *Ibid.*: "Etus sanctorum concorditer iste precetur/Ut Deus ipsorum meritis sibi propitiatur."

¹⁶³ Aberth, 139.

Christian persecution of the Jews became “ritualized violence” that spread through the continent as quickly as the plague.¹⁶⁴ The mania caused by fear sometimes led to the extermination of whole Jewish communities. On August 24, 1349, six thousand Jews were murdered at Mainz; all three thousand Jews at Erfurt faced the same fate.¹⁶⁵ This evil is preserved in art, as in one example from Gilles li Muisis’ *Chronicle* of 1350 (fig. 31). In this manuscript illumination, a large bonfire is engulfing a group of Jews. To the right of the bonfire, a gathering sadly observes as a woman restrains a young boy who looks ready to jump into the fire, presumably to save someone he loves. In harsh contrast, the crowd on the left is cheering as the Jews burn, while two men fuel the fire with small logs.



31. Gilles li Muisis, *Chronicle* (illustration), Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique.

A similar scene is found within the pages of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* (fig. 32). The book was written by Hartmann Schedel, a scholar and native of Nuremberg. Michael Wohlgemut and his stepson Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, who had gained fame for their woodcuts, illustrated the *Chronicle*, which was originally published in Latin on June 12,

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁶⁵ Tuchman, 121.

1493. Here, the anguished faces of the Jews are surrounded by flames, as a faceless man carries a bundle of small logs toward the fire.



32. Michael Wohlgemut and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, *Burning of the Jews*, *Nuremberg Chronicle*.

There seemed no escape for the Jews, who suffered with or without confessing to the false accusations against them. They sometimes resorted to burning themselves in their own houses rather than fall to their Christian enemies.¹⁶⁶ However, not everyone blamed the Jews for the plague. In Konrad of Megenberg's 1350 treatise, *Concerning the Mortality in Germany*, he addresses both sides of the dispute. In his defense of the Jews, he observed that "they themselves had died in droves from the same exact cause of this common mortality."¹⁶⁷ Pope Clement VI made a similar observation in his release of *Sicut Judeis* on October 1, 1348. The *bull*a, an attempt to protect the Jews, says:

Although we would wish that the Jews be suitably and severely punished should perchance they be guilty...it does not seem credible that the Jews on this occasion are responsible...because this nearly universal pestilence, in accordance with God's hidden judgment, has afflicted and continues to afflict the Jews themselves, as well as many other races who had never been known to live alongside them, throughout the various regions of the world.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁶⁷ Aberth, 157.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 158-159. This text was added to a standard *bull*a that protected the Jews. The *bull*a was periodically released from the twelfth century onward, including on July 5, 1348, by Clement VI.

Flagellants

The belief that the Black Death was a punishment from God led many to take extreme measures not only against other races, but against themselves.¹⁶⁹ In violent hysteria, flagellants beat themselves to mimic Christ's suffering, believing this extreme penance would gain God's favor and protect them from the plague. Numerous contemporary accounts describe the flagellants and the various opinions of them.¹⁷⁰ In Tournai in 1350, Gilles li Muisis noticed that "some people of sound mind did not praise them, and others greatly approved of what they were doing."¹⁷¹ Strasbourg chronicler Fritsche Closener recorded the common people's love of the flagellants. He told posterity: "You should know that whenever the flagellants whipped themselves, there were large crowds and the greatest pious weeping that one should ever see."¹⁷² People readily welcomed the flagellants into their towns and homes and gave them money and gifts, for they believed the flagellants were capable of miracles.¹⁷³ Some collected the flagellants' blood, revering it as a holy relic.¹⁷⁴ In their fervor, the flagellants themselves falsely estimated their power. Closener tells this story: "They also dragged a dead child about in a meadow around their ring as they whipped themselves and wanted to make it live again, but that didn't happen."¹⁷⁵ Eventually, he said, people "got tired of

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 119-120. Some people believed the flagellants were the main party persecuting the Jews. Benedictine monk Jean de Fayt preached a sermon at Avignon on October 5, 1349. The pope was present for his speech, in which he claimed that the flagellants were the primary party that blamed the Jews for poisoning the wells and that "everywhere [flagellants] strive to kill Jews, thinking that it pleases God to exterminate them."

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 118-120.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Joseph P. Byrne, *The Black Death* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2004), 80.

¹⁷⁵ Aberth, 131.

them...they became a nuisance.”¹⁷⁶ On October 20, 1349, Pope Clement VI released a mandate to end the flagellant movement.¹⁷⁷ Soon after, on February 15, 1350, King Philip VI of France issued an edict with the same intent. His words represent the opinion of educated people:

We have understood that a sect of people, under the color of devotion and a false penance, who call themselves flagellants and penitents, has arisen and multiplied...in violation of the good condition and observance of the Christian faith. Through their feints, simulations, and deceptions, several simple people, ignorant of holy scripture and of the true path of their salvation, have been deceived into following the said sect.¹⁷⁸

Despite these attempts at suppression, the flagellants continued their extraordinary penance, and even reappeared in the fifteenth century, at which time many were executed by fire.¹⁷⁹

The flagellants usually wore white robes, capes, and hoods decorated with crosses, which they pulled down around their waists before ritualistically beating themselves with a three-thong whip tipped with sharp metal. Each promised himself to the cult for thirty-three days in mimicry of Jesus’ life, during which time he abstained from sex, bathing, shaving, and other forbidden actions. Flagellants beat their backs with whips and sang as they paraded behind banners and crosses through towns and countryside.¹⁸⁰ The *Book of Memorable Matters*, written by the Dominican friar Heinrich of Herford ca. 1349-1355, vividly describes the flagellants’ rituals.

They marched down the street in procession...[then] enter the church...cover their bodies from the navel down, leaving the upper part totally nude. They take up the whips in their hands. [T]he senior flagellant...prostrates himself upon the ground...after him the second...then the third...and so on in succession. After

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁷⁹ Byrne, *The Black Death*, 81.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

this, one of them strikes the first flagellant with a whip, saying: “God grants you remission of all your sins, arise!” And he gets up. Then he does the same to the second and so on through the order. [They] start to sing in a high voice a religious song. [W]henver in the course of their psalmody they come to a part of the song where the passion of Christ is mentioned, all together they suddenly throw themselves to the ground...wherever they happen to be and on whatever is lying there, either on the earth, or on mud, or thorns, or thistles, or nettles or stones. They do not fall down in stages on their knees...but they drop like logs, flat upon their belly and face with their arms outstretched.¹⁸¹



33. Anonymous, *Chronicle* (illustration), Constance, Germany.

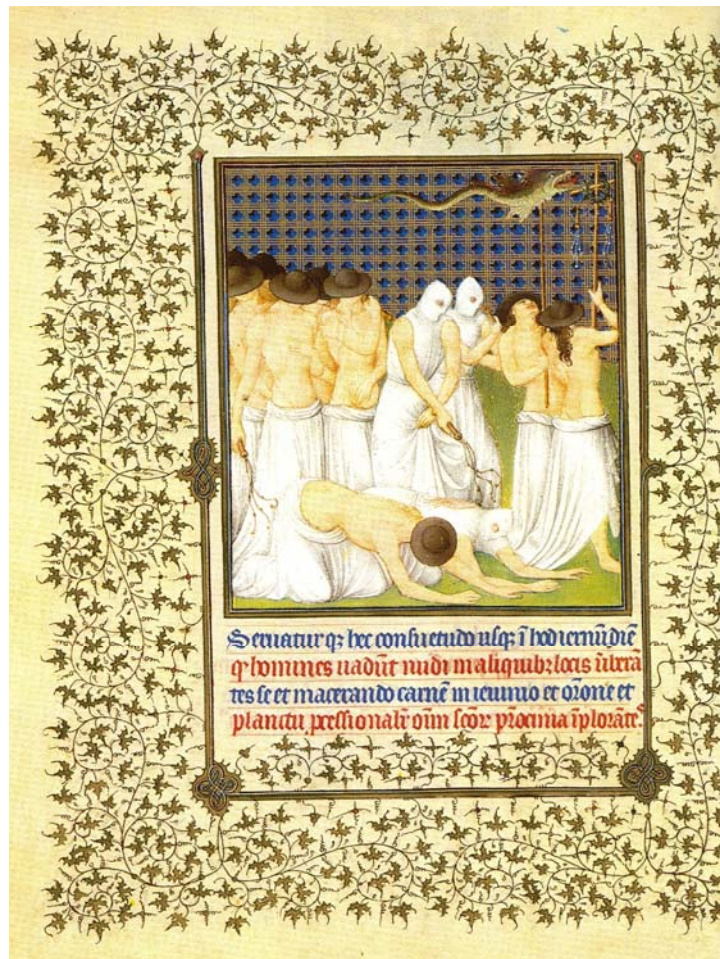
A fifteenth-century chronicle from Constance (Germany) illustrates a procession of flagellants (fig. 33). The procession is led by a banner with a red cross. The leader is followed by a man carrying a cross, who beats the banner-bearer. Behind these two men, two more men kneel down as they are simultaneously whipped and blessed. A similar scene is found in the *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493 (fig. 34). Here, two men are standing together, stripped down to their waists. They each hold two flagella, which they swing backwards to strike their backs.

¹⁸¹ Aberth, 123-124.



34. Michael Wohlgemut and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, *Flagellants*, Nuremberg Chronicle.

The pictorial series in Jean de Berry's *Belles Heures* that was previously discussed ends with the *Procession of Flagellants* (fig. 35), which is the only one of the



35. The Limbourg Brothers, *Procession of Flagellants*, *Belles Heures*, New York, Cloisters.

four pictures in the series not inspired by the *Golden Legend*. This procession is led by a man carrying a cross and another carrying a ferocious dragon-like fish. The only visible face is that of the man carrying the beast. Some of the men are fully clothed and hooded in white garments, while others are stripped to their waists and wear black hats. Amid the procession, two men prostrate themselves as a third draws blood from their backs with a flagellum.



36. Giovanni Villani, *A Flagellant Confraternity in Procession*, *Cronica*.

The flagellants' desire to mimic Christ's suffering is conveyed in the fourteenth-century *Cronica* of Giovanni Villani. The illumination of *A Flagellant Confraternity in Procession* portrays men walking behind a processional banner as they swing whips over their shoulders to land between their shoulder blades (fig. 36). Each flagellant looks up

toward a banner that is hung below a cross. The banner carries an image of the flagellation of a haloed Jesus.¹⁸²

Tabernacle



37. Andrea Orcagna, Tabernacle, Florence, Orsanmichele.

Religious fervor induced by plague did not always result in destructive behavior. Among the many icons to which people prayed for mercy was *The Virgin and Child with Angels*, which Bernardo Daddi was commissioned to paint in 1347 for Orsanmichele in Florence. Feeling that their prayers to the image were successful, people gave large sums of money to the confraternity of Orsanmichele in the form of gifts or legacies. A decision was made around 1352 that the money collected – some 350,000 florins – would be used to commission a tabernacle to house Bernardo's miracle-working painting.

¹⁸² Diana Norman, ed., *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion 1280-1400. vol. I: Interpretative Essays* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press and The Open University, 1995), 181-182.

Andrea di Cione, a Florentine painter-sculptor also known as Orcagna, completed the magnificent structure in 1359 (fig. 37). The tabernacle is constructed of marble, colored glass, gilding, and polychromy and is surrounded by a bronze and marble railing. This shrine to the Virgin remains *in situ*.¹⁸³

The Dance of Death

Amid outbreaks of plague, a popular metaphor was that life was a game of chess, and encountering plague was check-mate. This theme is found in the poetry of the monk John Lydgate from Bury St. Edmunds in England. In the early 1430s, he translated a French poem, *La Danse Macabre*.¹⁸⁴ Two of the subjects of this poem, an empress and an amorous gentlewoman, label themselves as being “check-mate” by the plague.¹⁸⁵



38. Anonymous, *Death as a Chess Player*, Norwich, St. Andrew.

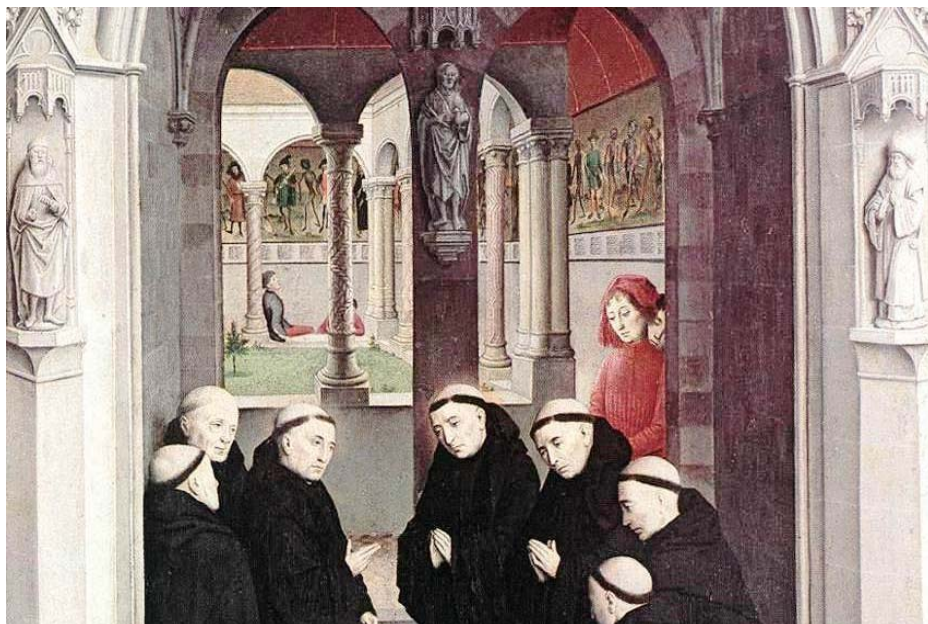
¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 147-149.

¹⁸⁴ Aberth, 165. Lydgate embellished his translation of this poem with some of his own lines.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

Approximately seventy years later, ca. 1500, a series of forty-four stained-glass windows that depict the *Dance of Death* were installed in the church of St. Andrew in Norwich. The only window extant from this set portrays death as a chess player, with a bishop as his opponent (fig. 38).¹⁸⁶

Images of the *Danse Macabre*, or Dance of Death, became increasingly common through the course of the fifteenth century.¹⁸⁷ It became so popular that from the sixteenth century alone, 82 different extant books of hours incorporate images of the theme.¹⁸⁸ A fresco of the *Danse Macabre* even appears on the walls of a cloister in the background of Simon Marmion's *St. Bertin Altarpiece* of 1459 (fig. 39).¹⁸⁹ The theme's



39. Simon Marmion, *St. Bertin Altarpiece* (detail), Berlin, Staatliche Museen.

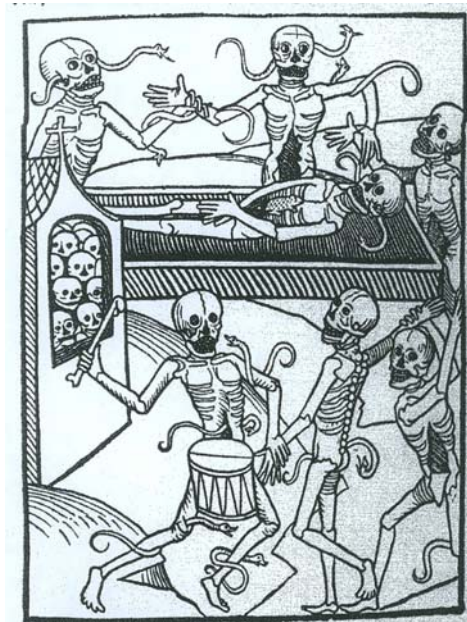
¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 165-167.

¹⁸⁷ The earliest known version was a monumental mural decorating the walls of the cemetery at Les Innocents, a Franciscan convent in Paris. The cycle, now destroyed, was painted between August of 1424 and Easter of 1425. Sophie Oosterwijk, "Of Corpses, Constables, and Kings: The *Danse Macabre* in Late Medieval and Renaissance Culture," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, Vol. 157 (2004), 66-67.

¹⁸⁸ J. Brossollet, "L'Influence de la Peste du Moyen-Age sur le Thème de la Danse Macabre," *Pagine di Storia della Medicina*, Vol. 13 (1969), 43.

¹⁸⁹ Eichberger, 291.

standard iconography consists of personifications of death, in the form of corpses or skeletons, performing a macabre dance characterized by bizarre, exaggerated movements. Their peculiar gestures imitate the involuntary actions of the victims of plague, whose bodies were poisoned by the cell necrosis that immediately preceded death. Sometimes the dead dance together in a group, but usually the cavorting corpses are travelling in a parade, each leading a member of a different class or profession. The primary message of the *Danse Macabre* is that death strikes everyone, without exception, as was made painfully obvious by the onslaught of plague.



40. Anonymous, *The Heidelberg Dance of Death* (woodcut illustration).

A German woodcut series, known as both the *Knoblochtzer-Druck* and *The Heidelberg Dance of Death* (*Der Heidelberger Totentanz*), was published ca. 1485.¹⁹⁰ One page features a circle of cavorting cadavers whose eyes and facial expressions convey a joyous mania in spite of the snakes that crawl through their rotted bodies (fig. 40). The reveling dead link arms as a drum-playing corpse ushers them around one body

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

that still lies in a grave. The *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493 contains an analogous scene (fig. 41). Again, corpses jump and turn around a body within a grave, while their putrefied faces convey a wild energy. But here they are conducted by a horn-player and represent various stages of decay; the central two are fully skeletal, save for tufts of hair, while the corpse on the right drapes her entrails over her wrist below the sagging flesh of what was her breast.¹⁹¹



41. Michael Wohlgemut and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, *Dance of Death*, *Nuremberg Chronicle*.

The Church of Saint-Robert at the Abbey of Chaise-Dieu (Riom) is the location of a dilapidated mural depicting the *Danse Macabre* (figs. 42a-b). Construction of the Benedictine church began in 1344, under the guidance of Pope Clement VI.¹⁹² The murals were added ca. 1460-1470 to remind the laity that death is the great leveler, as no amount of money, power, or beauty will nullify its inevitability. In the painting, elongated skeletal figures hunch their shoulders and twist their limbs as they lead a cast

¹⁹¹ Byrne, *The Black Death*, fig. 8.

¹⁹² Frederique-Anne Constantini, "Les Artistes de la Chaise-Dieu (1344-1352) d'après l'Etude de la Comptabilité Pontificale," *Revue de l'Art*, No. 110 (Jan., 1995), 44-47. The structure also houses the tomb of Clement VI, who was pope during the Black Death.

of characters to their deaths. The sampling of various social groups includes such people as a pope, an emperor, a king, a knight, a poet, a merchant, a troubadour, a serf, a child, and a mother. Below the parade, an inscription notifies viewers that “it is yourself.”¹⁹³



42a. Anonymous, *Danse Macabre*, Riom, St-Robert, Chaise-Dieu.



42b. Anonymous, *Danse Macabre* (detail), Riom, St-Robert, Chaise-Dieu.

Bernt Notke, a Lübeck sculptor and painter, completed two monumental cycles of the *Danse Macabre*: one at St. Matthew’s Chapel, later renamed for St. Anthony, in the Niguliste Church at Reval (Tallinn, Estonia) (figs. 44a-c), and another in the Marienkirche Chapel at Beichtkapelle (Lübeck) in 1463 (figs. 45a-b).¹⁹⁴ The exact date of the Reval *Danse* is unknown, but it was certainly created between 1463, the date of the

¹⁹³ Tuchman, 533 and fig. 65.

¹⁹⁴ Brossollet, 43. Plague struck Lübeck in 1463.

Lübeck version, and 1493, when the *Nuremberg Chronicle* was published. Both the *Chronicle* and the Reval *Danse* feature architectural additions to Lübeck's cityscape that are not represented in Notke's first painting. Not all of the Reval version is extant, and the series at Lübeck was destroyed in a bombardment in 1942. Despite its destruction, the Lübeck painting is known from photographs taken by Wilhelm Castelli, which reveal the similarities between many elements of the two paintings (fig. 43). The photographs also aid in reconstructing the sections of the painting that have been lost from Reval.¹⁹⁵



43. Bernt Notke, *Danse Macabre*, Reval (left), Lübeck (right).

In both of Notke's versions of the *Danse Macabre*, life-size figures from many social classes form a procession. They are guided by emaciated, semi-shrouded corpses, while a continuous scroll beneath the figures narrates the dialogue between each dancing corpse and the person who is being led to his or her death. At Reval, the cadavers' unrestrained dancing is led by a bagpipe player, whose ashy-green coloring alone seems to embody death. He addresses the mortals in the parade, saying:

¹⁹⁵Elina Gertsman, "The Dance of Death in Reval (Tallinn): The Preacher and His Audience," *Gesta*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2003), 144-145. The paintings at Lübeck were also copied on canvas by Anton Wortmann in 1701, but he made changes to the original composition.

I call all and everyone to this dance:
pope, emperor, and all creatures
poor, rich, big, or small.
Step forward, mourning won't help now!
Remember though at all times
To bring good deeds with you
And to repent your sins
For you must dance to my pipe.¹⁹⁶

In front of the musician is a preacher perched in a pulpit. He addresses death's victims, assuring them that this dance with death was inevitable:

O, reasonable creature, whether poor or rich!
Look here into this mirror, young and old,
and remember all
that no one can stay here
when death comes as you see here...
My dear children, I want to advise you
not to lead your sheep astray
but to be to them a good model
Before death suddenly appears at your side.¹⁹⁷

Behind the musician, the disjointed dance of one corpse is not inhibited by the coffin that rests on its shoulder. Other figures in the extant portion of the Reval *Danse* (figs. 44a-c) are a pope, an emperor, an empress, a cardinal, and a king. The discourse between each cadaver and mortal focuses on repentance, with emphasis on the grave sin of pride. The king addresses death:

Oh death, your words have scared me!
This dance I haven't learned.
Dukes, knights, and squires
serve me precious dishes
and everyone took heed
not to speak the words I disliked to hear.
Now you come unexpectedly
and rob me of my entire kingdom!¹⁹⁸

To this, Death responds:

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

All your thoughts were about
worldly splendor.
How does that help you now? You have to sink into the earth
and become like me.
You let bent and perverted laws
prevail during your kingship
you wrought violence on the poor as if they were slaves.¹⁹⁹

We know from the photographs of Notke's painting at Lübeck (figs. 45a-b) that a variety of other people trailed these powerful figures at Reval, including such people as a physician, a usurer, a craftsman, a hermit, and a youth. To all mortals, both those in flesh and in paint, the *Danse Macabre* "effectively demand[s] pious self-examination," for as people learned from their experiences with the plague, death can strike at any time, so one's soul must always be prepared for judgment.²⁰⁰



44a. Bernt Notke, *Danse Macabre* (detail, center), Reval, St. Matthew's Chapel (St. Anthony's), Niguliste.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.



44b. Bernt Notke, *Danse Macabre* (detail, left), Reval, St. Matthew's Chapel (St. Anthony's), Niguliste.



44c. Bernt Notke, *Danse Macabre* (detail, right), Reval, St. Matthew's Chapel (St. Anthony's), Niguliste.



45a. Bernt Notke, *Danse Macabre* (detail, left), Lübeck, Marienkirche, Beichtkapelle.



45b. Bernt Notke, *Danse Macabre* (detail, right), Lübeck, Marienkirche, Beichtkapelle.

Death's whims are portrayed in a late fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript that features the French poem *Danse Macabre des Femmes*. Like most of the pages in the book, each page discussed in this thesis shows a personification of death abruptly tearing a woman from the day's activities, highlighting the suddenness of mortal demise that was so commonly experienced during outbreaks of plague. Below, the corresponding section of the poem narrates the dialogue between the macabre kidnapper and the woman. The pages' margins are intricately embellished with colorful floral motifs. The illuminations seen here are unique to the genre for two reasons. First of all, most *Danses Macabres* focus on men, with minimal emphasis on a few women, such as an empress or a mother; *Danse Macabre des Femmes* omits men. Secondly, Death is usually rendered as the great leveler, but this poem does not distinguish among social classes.



46. Anonymous, *Death and the Shepherdess*, *Danse Macabre des Femmes*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.

The first illumination, *Death and the Shepherdess* (fig. 46), depicts a partially shrouded corpse brandishing a scythe. He grabs the hand of a shepherdess so quickly that she doesn't have time to react, but is still petting a small white dog. The accompanying poem reads:

Death

I will not leave you behind.
 Come along, take my hand,
 Listen, pretty Shepherdess,
 We walk along hand in hand.
 You won't go to the fields any more, morning or evening,
 To watch the sheep and care for your animals.
 There will be nothing left of you tomorrow.
 After the vigils come the holidays.

The Shepherdess

I say goodbye to the stout shepherd
 Whom I regret leaving greatly

He won't ever have another hawthorne cap,
 For here is sad news.
 Goodbye shepherds, goodbye shepherdesses,
 Goodbye fair fields that God made grow,
 Goodbye flowers, goodbye red roses.
 We must all obey the Master.²⁰¹



47. Anonymous, *Death and the Village Woman*, *Danse Macabre des Femmes*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.

In *Death and the Village Woman* (fig. 47), Death points forward, indicating where he is taking the village woman, who extends her hand toward him in a questioning gesture. The figure of Death in *Death and the Witch* (fig. 48) also points forward, and both grotesque corpses are crowned with wild tufts of hair. The text below each image reads, respectively:

Death
 Poor Village Woman,
 Follow my procession without delay.

²⁰¹ Ann Tukey Harrison, ed., *The Danse Macabre of Women: ms. Fr. 995 of the Bibliothèque nationale* (Kent, Ohio, and London, England: The Kent State University Press, 1994), 92.

You won't sell eggs or cheese any more.
 Go empty your basket.
 If you have endured
 Poverty, long suffering, and loss,
 You will be satisfied.
 Each will find his just desserts.

The Village Woman

I take Death for what it's worth,
 Willingly and patiently.
 Free archers have taken my chickens
 And everything I had.
 Nobody thinks about the poor.
 There is no charity among neighbors.
 Everyone wants to be rich.
 No one cares for poverty.²⁰²



48. Anonymous, *Death and the Witch, Danse Macabre des Femmes*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.

Death

Hear ye! Hear ye! Know ye all
 That this old witch
 Has caused the death and deception
 Of several people in many ways.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 96.

She is condemned as a murderess
 To die. She won't live much longer.
 I'm taking her to her grave.
 It's a fine thing to do good.

The Witch

My good people, have pity
 On me, a poor sinner,
 And give me, for mercy's sake,
 The gift of an Our Father or a Mass.
 I did wrong in my youth
 For which I now pay the price.
 Pray God redeem my soul.
 No one can do anything contrary to one's destiny.²⁰³



49. Anonymous, *Death and the Bride, Danse Macabre des Femmes* Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.

The most poignant image in the *Danse Macabre des Femmes* illustrates Death grabbing the hand of an elegantly dressed bride on her wedding day (fig. 49). The putrid body of Death retains a few tufts of hair on his fleshless skull and seems to have just made a sweeping arch with his hand, indicating the direction in which the bride must follow him. The stanzas below *Death and the Bride*, in which line two states the theme pervading all *Danses Macabres*, is equally pitiful:

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 110.

Death

To show you your folly
And to show that people ought to watch out for Death,
Take my hand, pretty Bride.
Let's go take off our clothes;
There's no more work for you
You will come to bed in another place.
You shouldn't get too excited.
God's acts are marvelous.

The Bride

On the very day I desired
To have a special joy in my life,
I only get grief, unhappiness,
And I must die so suddenly.
Death, why do you lust
For me, why take me so quickly?
I haven't deserved such a blow.
But we must praise God for everything.²⁰⁴

Saints

The horror of the Black Death was thought to result from the wrath of God, so many medieval people turned to saints as intercessors between them and the Almighty. It was thought that saints were seated around the throne of God in heaven, where they could easily communicate with God and ask that he be merciful toward those who were vulnerable to the plague. Over 100 different saints were charged with the role of protector. The most popular plague saints were Sts. Sebastian and Roch. Local saints, whose relics were housed in town churches, comprised the majority of those whose protection was sought.²⁰⁵ The following paintings were a sort of tangible hope for victims of the plague, bearing witness to the belief that, even through their despair, they had the power to save themselves.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁰⁵ Byrne, *Daily Life*, 106-108.



50. Giovanni di Paolo, *St. Nicholas Saving Florence*, Vienna, Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künste.

St. Nicholas of Tolentino was a minor plague saint who is depicted in Giovanni di Paolo's painting *St. Nicholas Saving Florence* (fig. 50). St. Nicholas was not directly associated with plague, but he was commonly invoked to intervene for souls in purgatory. Giovanni's panel, dated 1456, is part of a *vita* altarpiece that was created for the convent church of Montepulciano. One of the saint's posthumous miracles is the subject of the painting, which shows St. Nicholas floating in the upper left with his hand outstretched in a gesture of blessing, indicating that he is protecting the city of Florence. Across from St. Nicholas, the dome of Florence's Cathedral is visible above the architecture. Below, the emptiness of the streets is interrupted by funerary activities. Two men carry a coffin and taper candles into the house on the right. On the left, a priest and a ministrant carry a ciborium containing the Eucharist administered during last rites, the viaticum. A funeral procession is under way in the background.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ Boeckl, *Images*, 86-87.



51. Fiorenzo di Lorenzo, *Saints Romanus and Roch Interceding with God the Father on Behalf of Deruta*, Deruta, San Francesco.

The local saint of Deruta, Romanus, along with St. Roch, was invoked in Fiorenzo di Lorenzo's fresco *Saints Romanus and Roch Interceding with God the Father on Behalf of Deruta* (fig. 51).²⁰⁷ The fresco, dated 1478, emphasizes people's reliance on their existing relationship with a local saint before they trusted a universal plague saint to protect them; the people of Deruta relied on St. Romanus to intercede through St. Roch.²⁰⁸ In the fresco, St. Romanus gestures toward the bubo on St. Roch's leg with an open palm. St. Roch looks out at the viewer as he reveals his stigma. His contraction of plague is related to a heaven-sent arrow. According to the *Acta Breviora*, "at once, feeling the deadly dart strike him in one of his hipbones, he gave thanks to God."²⁰⁹ Between the two saints, God the Father is enclosed in a mandorla, while below them is the cityscape of Deruta.

²⁰⁷ Marshall, "Manipulating", 500. Deruta is in the Marches.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 500-502.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 506, n. 57.



52. Bartolomeo della Gatta, *Saint Roch Interceding with Christ on Behalf of Arezzo*, Arezzo, Pinacoteca.

Saint Roch is the focus of another painting from the 1470s, Bartolomeo della Gatta's *Saint Roch Interceding with Christ on Behalf of Arezzo* (fig. 52). It was St. Roch's own triumph over plague in the fourteenth century that made him such an admired intercessor. Also, his victory was paralleled with Christ's triumph over mortal death. Here, as in other portrayals, he displays his bubo as he kneels and looks up at Christ. The sight of a bubo on a living man gave victims of the plague hope. St. Roch's hands come together as he pleads for Christ's mercy on the town of Arezzo, visible in the background. Two angels hover over the city and break the arrows of plague before they

descend upon it, thus answering the prayers of St. Roch and affirming the Christian belief that saints have the power to influence God's decisions.²¹⁰



53. Benozzo Gozzoli, *Four Saints with Donors*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In 1480, Benozzo Gozzoli was commissioned to execute a painting, *Four Saints with Donors* (fig. 53). The composition betrays the mind of Gozzoli at work, but the execution reveals that much of the painting was completed by other artists in his shop. Two small-scale donors in the foreground kneel and fold their hands in prayer. An unidentified townscape recedes into the distance, while angels flying above dramatically raise their arms to hurl spears of plague down upon the town. The four saints depicted, Nicholas of Tolentino, Roch, Sebastian, and Bernardino of Siena, are identified by inscriptions on their halos. Another inscription, indicating that the four saints are “defenders against pestilence,” reveals the intention of the work: to honor these holy

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 505-507.

men in exchange for protection from the destructive force of the plague.²¹¹ Nicholas holds a book and a sprig of lilies that signifies his virginity. He is looking at St. Roch, who reveals his bubo. Bernardino points toward heaven as his open book solicits God the Father with text from John 17:6: “Father, I have manifested thy name unto all men; merciful Lord, show us thy compassion.”²¹² He makes eye contact with St. Sebastian, who does not suffer from arrow wounds but holds three of the projectiles in his hand.

Saint Sebastian was the most popular plague intercessor. In Normandy alone, at least 564 images of St. Sebastian are extant.²¹³ According to the *Golden Legend*, Diocletian ordered that Sebastian be tied to a post, and then he ordered that his soldiers shoot him with arrows. “They shot so many arrows into his body,” said Voragine, “that he looked like a porcupine, and left him for dead.”²¹⁴ Sebastian lived, and later stood on the steps of the imperial palace as he told a shocked Diocletian, “The Lord deigned to revive me so that I could meet you and rebuke you for the evils you inflict on the servants of Christ!”²¹⁵

St. Sebastian is inseparable from the instruments of his martyrdom, hence his popularity as a plague saint. He became a sort of “lightning rod” who drew the arrows of plague into his own body rather than let them pierce mortals.²¹⁶ Also, St. Sebastian’s pierced but resurrected body was compared to Christ’s, who triumphed over death despite

²¹¹ Diane Cole Ahl, *Benozzo Gozzoli* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 189. The inscription says, “IIII Santi Difensori della Pestilentia.”

²¹² This translation is from the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which owns the painting: www.metmuseum.org.

²¹³ Byrne, *Daily Life*, 108. There exist so many images of St. Sebastian that I have chosen a small, but nonetheless representative, sample of works to address in this thesis.

²¹⁴ Voragine, 100.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

²¹⁶ Marshall, “Waiting”, 66-67.

his body being pierced with nails.²¹⁷ Mimicry of Christ's suffering was a perceived avenue to salvation. In 1349, Gabriele de' Mussis explained the veneration of St. Sebastian: "For among the aforesaid martyrs, some, as stories relate, are said to have died from repeated blows, and it was thus the common opinion that they would be able to protect people against the arrows of death."²¹⁸



54. Nicoletto Semitecolo, *Scenes from the Life of St. Sebastian*, Padua, Biblioteca Capitolare.

In 1367, a series of panels dedicated to St. Sebastian was signed and dated by the Venetian artist Nicoletto Semitecolo (fig. 54). Created for the Duomo at Padua, four scenes from the life of St. Sebastian according to the *Golden Legend* are arranged below images of the Trinity and the Madonna of Humility. The first scene illustrates St. Sebastian's trial before the Roman Emperors Diocletian and Maximian, who demanded that Sebastian worship their pagan gods. Sebastian would not renounce his faith, and this

²¹⁷ Marshall, "Manipulating," 495.

²¹⁸ Byrne, *Daily Life*, 108.

scene shows him encouraging two other men, Mark and Marcellinus, to follow his example. That his back is toward the emperors signifies his defiance of their orders. The saint's recently converted jailor, Nicostratus, stands behind his wife Zoe as she kneels to thank Sebastian for miraculously curing her. In the next scene, arrows pierce Sebastian's flesh as the twin emperors watch his punishment. Since he miraculously survived this execution, the next scene shows him being clubbed to death by the Roman soldiers. In the upper right corner of the third scene, soldiers dump his lifeless body into the Cloaca Maxima, the great sewer of Rome.²¹⁹ Finally, the fourth panel depicts St. Sebastian's burial near the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul, as he requested when he appeared to Saint Lucina to tell her where his body could be found.²²⁰



55a. Giovanni del Biondo, *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.

²¹⁹ Norman, 187-189.

²²⁰ Voragine, Vol. 1, 100.

A similar altarpiece of Saint Sebastian was commissioned for the Duomo of Florence in the 1370s (figs. 55a-c). This triptych, attributed to Giovanni del Biondo, features a large central image of St. Sebastian being shot with arrows while he communicates with an angel who brings him a martyr's palm branch and crown. The wings of the triptych feature scenes from St. Sebastian's life below images of the Annunciation. The first panel in the left wing depicts the saint preaching to a crowd. The central image is intended to be read next in the series, before a divided panel in the right wing that shows both Sebastian's final execution and the disposal of his body.



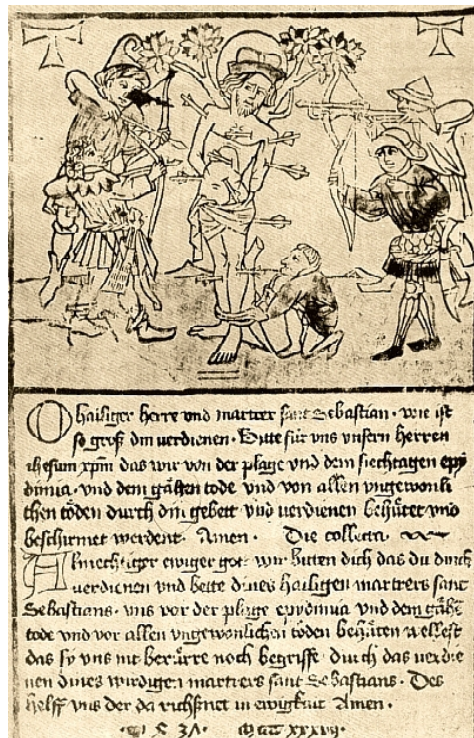
55b. Giovanni del Biondo, *Life of St. Sebastian*, Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.

Below this panel is another dual scene of Sebastian appearing to a haloed St. Lucina to tell her where his body is before she retrieves him from the sewer. Straying from the format used by Nicoletto Semitecolo, Giovanni included a scene that is most relevant to this thesis. The bottom of the left wing contains the scene *Saint Sebastian Saves a City from the Plague* (fig. 55c). A haloed St. Sebastian folds his hands in prayer and looks toward heaven while men and women kneel before him. In the sky above him, barely



55c. Giovanni del Biondo, *Saint Sebastian Saves a City from the Plague*, Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.

visible, an angel gives chase to a devil. The town is deserted except for corpses that lie in the streets, in their homes, and within doorways; the only two survivors are occupied with the task of burying the dead.²²¹



56. Anonymous, German Woodcut.

²²¹ Norman, 190-194.

A single-leaf German woodcut depicts the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian (fig. 56). Dated 1437, the sheet contains Sebastian's image above a prayer that asks him for his intercession with God to protect the reader from plague. Sebastian is tied to a tree and shot full of arrows. A man crouching at his feet seems to be just binding him to the trunk. Four other men encircle the martyr; three hold bows while the fourth, in the upper right corner, carefully aims a crossbow at Sebastian.²²²



57. Josse Lieferinxe, *St. Sebastian Intercedes during the Plague in Pavia*, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery.

St. Sebastian Intercedes during the Plague in Pavia (fig. 57), Josse Lieferinxe's painting that was briefly explored earlier, is one of eight panels narrating the life of St.

²²² Byrne, *The Black Death*, caption to fig. 4.

Sebastian.²²³ This panel illustrates one of St. Sebastian's post-mortem miracles as described in the *Golden Legend*:

All Italy was stricken by a plague so virulent that there was hardly anyone left to bury the dead, and this plague raged most of all in Rome and Pavia. At this time there appeared to some a good angel followed by a bad angel carrying a spear. When the good angel gave the command, the bad one struck and killed, and when he struck a house, all the people in it were carried out dead. Then it was divinely revealed that the plague would never cease until an altar was raised in Pavia in honor of Saint Sebastian. An altar was built in the church of Saint Peter in Chains, and at once the pestilence ceased.²²⁴

The painting depicts St. Sebastian kneeling before Christ, who extends one hand in blessing. The two heavenly beings float on clouds near the top of the painting. The cloud out of which Christ emerges is dark, possibly symbolizing the dark miasmas that were thought to cause the plague. True to the legend, an angel and a devil engage in a *psychomachia*, or an allegorical battle between good and evil over a soul.²²⁵ Below this aerial combat, two men drag a shrouded corpse from a large building in the background, a horse-drawn cart toting a cargo of dead bodies emerges from Pavia's city gates, and yet another cadaver is carried toward the mass grave in the foreground. To the left is a group of mourners whose grief is apparent in their facial expressions and their gestures: one woman throws her arms up in woe, while the man next to her clasps his hands in prayer. To the right, a priest reads from a missal as clergy emerge from a church carrying a cross and a bucket with holy water. Lying on the ground in front of them is the tiny shrouded body of an infant. In the foreground, two men were lowering a corpse into an already occupied grave when the left gravedigger suddenly collapsed under the weight of his

²²³ Until recently, the series was attributed to the Master of Saint Sebastian. A document of 1497 is now known, which records that eight panels were commissioned of Lieferinx and Bernardino Simondi of Piedmont. Seven of these survive, which were mostly painted by Lieferinx after Simondi's death in 1498. James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Paintings, Sculpture, the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575* (Englewood Cliffs and New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), 264-265.

²²⁴ Voragine, Vol. 1, 101.

²²⁵ Boeckl, *Images*, 71.

burden. His hat has fallen to the ground next to him, for he has jerked his head away from his bubo, in a movement described above.



58. Benozzo Gozzoli, *Saint Sebastian*, San Gimignano, Sant'Agostino.

In a chapel dedicated to St. Sebastian at the church of Sant'Agostino in San Gimignano is an altarpiece painted by Benozzo Gozzoli (fig. 58). Dated to July 28, 1464, Gozzoli's colossal fresco, over seventeen feet tall, was created quickly, as indicated by the mere sixteen visible *giornate*. The speedy completion reflects a desperate need for such an image in the wake of the plague that spread through San Gimignano in the previous month. In the altarpiece, St. Sebastian's body is not pierced by arrows because

the image was not intended to commemorate his martyrdom. Rather, it invokes the clothed and intact Saint as a protector: angels try to throw arrows at a dense crowd that is gathered around him in devotion, but Sebastian's cloak breaks the arrows, shielding the masses below from the plague. The representation of Sebastian is in imitation of both Christ and the Virgin; two angels hold a so-called *aureola* crown above his head, honoring his Christlike martyrdom, and his protective blue mantle is in the tradition of the Madonna della Misericordia. God and many of the angels surrounding him are prepared to release the arrows in their hands upon the people below as a punishment for their transgressions.²²⁶ Above, the Virgin and Christ kneel and gesture to those below with open palms as they look to God the Father, imploring him to have mercy on his people. Christ displays the wound in his side, reminding God of his sacrifice, while the Virgin reveals her breasts as a reminder of her role in the life of Christ. Mother and son have done so much for God the Father that certainly he will grant their wishes.

A different, earlier outbreak of plague in San Gimignano prompted the town's priors to promise the populace a painting of Saint Sebastian for his chapel in the communal Collegiata, "for the health of the people of San Gimignano and to procure their deliverance from death."²²⁷ The pledge of January 4, 1463, was not fulfilled immediately, as the city was soon free of pestilence. Finally, on February 25, 1465, the priors honored their vow, and Benozzo Gozzoli was commissioned to execute the image, which was completed on January 18, 1466 (fig. 59). Although this fresco was painted within two years of the fresco in Sant'Agostino, and by the same artist in the same city, it represents a different theme: Sebastian the martyr. Gozzoli returns to the tradition of

²²⁶ Ahl, 142-145.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.



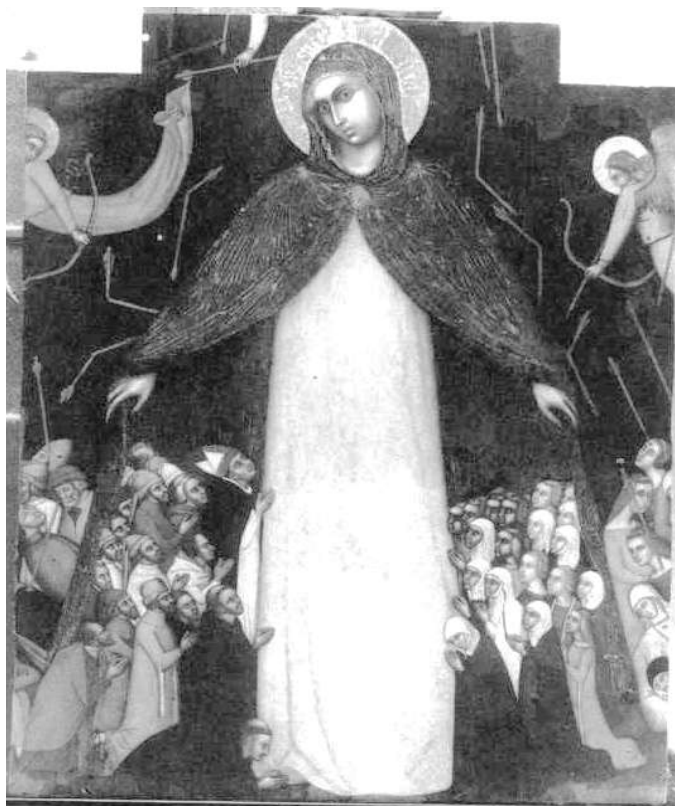
59. Benozzo Gozzoli, *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, San Gimignano, Collegiata.

depicting a stripped, bound, and pierced Sebastian surrounded by the archers who torment him. Christ, the Virgin, and angels are enclosed in the orb of heaven; Christ looks down toward the saint and blesses him, as he opens his other hand to reveal one of his stigmata. As in the fresco at Sant'Agostino, Sebastian is represented in imitation of Christ: his face is a mirror image of Christ's, he is similarly haloed, and angels support an *aureola* crown above his head. The parallel is emphasized further by the vertical line that can be traced between Christ's wound and Sebastian's face.²²⁸

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 142-147.

Madonna della Misericordia

Protection from the plague was sought not only through saints, but through the popular image of the *Madonna della Misericordia*, or Madonna of Mercy. Within this theme, the Virgin is the most prominent figure in the composition, and she expands her cloak to form a protective tent over those who seek refuge below. The plague was viewed as a manifestation of God's wrath, but the Virgin does not need to consult him before she opposes his will. The *Madonna della Misericordia* "acts as a supreme and autonomous power...secure in the knowledge that God can deny her nothing."²²⁹



60. Barnaba da Modena, *Plague Madonna della Misericordia*, Genoa, Sta. Maria dei Servi.

An early example of the subject is a Genoese altarpiece painted by Barnaba da Modena in the 1370s (fig. 60). It was commissioned by a confraternity dedicated to the

²²⁹ Marshall, "Manipulating," 510.

Madonna della Misericordia, revealing their relationship with the Virgin and their confidence that devotion to her would be rewarded. Unfortunately, all sides of the panel have been reduced so that parts of some figures have been destroyed, and other figures that may have been present are left to the viewer's imagination.²³⁰ In the surviving portion, a haloed Virgin calmly looks out at the viewer as she spreads her mantle. Under the protection of her cloak, compact crowds of small-scale people look up at her in thanks; some fold their hands in prayer and one man prostrates himself at her feet. Fragments of bow-wielding angels shoot arrows down at the mortals. Some arrows are repelled by the Madonna's mantle, while others pierce those beyond its protective barrier, infecting the impious with the plague.



61. Pietro Alemanno, *Plague Madonna della Misericordia*, San Ginesio, Collegiata.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 512.

Another version of the *Madonna della Misericordia* preaches the same message: those who repent their sins and trust in the Virgin will escape the terrible punishment of plague. The lower border of this altarpiece contains an inscription informing posterity that the Commune of San Ginesio in the Marches commissioned Pietro Alemanno to execute the painting in 1485 (fig. 61).²³¹ In the tradition of the *Madonna della Misericordia*, only those shielded by her outstretched mantle, held by two saints here, escape the onslaught of arrows from above. This image is unique in the depiction of plague-bearers. Grinning demons, not angels or God, launch the infectious weapons down upon the people. Also unlike Barnaba's altarpiece, the intended message is made clear through inscriptions within the composition. The men who kneel under the right side of the Virgin's cloak speak to her, saying, "O Mary, under thy protection we seek refuge."²³² In contrast, those men who are pierced with the arrows of God's wrath inform the Virgin: "Justly we suffer these things, because we did not love you."²³³ The women who kneel at the Madonna's feet implore her: "O Mary, intercede for your female devotees."²³⁴ On the Virgin's left, the women who are dying of plague recognize their fault through saying, "Alas for us, because we did not have faith in you."²³⁵ The *Madonna della Misericordia* presents the Virgin as an omnipotent deity, capable of altering the lives of her devotees.

Benedetto Bonfigli painted a *Madonna della Misericordia* marked with the date 1464 (fig. 62). This canvas painting, intended to be carried in processions, shows the Virgin floating on clouds above a cityscape, with her mantle shielding vulnerable mortals

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 512.

²³² *Ibid.*, 514 (O Maria svb tvv[m] presidiv[m] co[n]fvgimvs).

²³³ *Ibid.* (O Maria intercede pro devote tibi femineo sexv).

²³⁴ *Ibid.* (Ivste hec patimvr qvia te non amavimvs).

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 515 (V[a]le nob[is] q[ui]a i[n] te no[n] credidimvs).

from the arrows of plague.²³⁶ She is surrounded by saints, such as Sts. Sebastian, Francis, and Bernardino of Siena. Above her head, Christ holds three arrows that he is prepared to release, while the two angels flanking him wield swords. At the gates of the city featured below the Madonna, a demon with bat-like wings torments people with arrows. People run from the demon, but the pile of bodies at his feet proves that not all are capable of escaping the plague. This painting uniquely portrays the arrow in a positive light; an angel thrusts one forward at the devil's chest. This angel is responding to prayers from the devout, and its mission is to relieve the people from the plague.



62. Benedetto Bonfigli, *Plague Madonna della Misericordia*, Perugia, Church of the Gonfalone.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 509.

The images that have been discussed in this thesis were directly or indirectly influenced by the Black Death of 1348, which killed half of the population of Europe. This epic catastrophe and subsequent outbreaks of plague bestowed indelible marks upon the minds and hearts of generations of medieval people. The fear initiated by widespread, sudden, gruesome death has been preserved in these images, as has the hope that tomorrow would come. Depictions of dead or decaying bodies, images of psychosocial responses, and religious icons and narratives that have survived from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries give modern viewers a glimpse of the souls of medieval people, through which we discover that they were not entirely unlike ourselves.

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Vita

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